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## IN AFGHANISTAN, A SECRET PLAN PAYS OFF THE TALIBAN

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□□□□ Afghan government is giving financial and military support to a breakaway Taliban faction, according to some Afghan and U.S. coalition officials, in an effort to sow rifts within the insurgency and nudge some of its leaders toward peace talks.

The effort comes as the U.S. military conducted an airstrike inside Pakistan that American officials said likely killed Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour, potentially setting the stage for another leadership struggle that could fragment the group further in the coming days. The Taliban, which usually respond promptly to requests for comment, hadnt issued a statement by late Sunday.

Senior Afghan and U.S. diplomatic, military and intelligence officials, including several who had roles in creating the program, described its details and said that resources provided by the U.S. were used to support it.

The Afghan intelligence agency is leading the drive to recruit new Taliban assets, Afghan and U.S. officials said. The agency relies on the U.S. for most of its funding and is still mentored by the Central Intelligence Agency. The CIA declined to comment for this article.

Despite billions invested in reconstruction, Afghanistan still relies on aid for most of its funding and the U.S. pays more than \$4 billion a year for its security forces.

The programs goal, Afghan and U.S. officials said, is to exploit divisions that emerged after the Talibans longtime leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, was revealed last July to have been dead for years, a disclosure that stunned local Taliban leaders and threw the group into disarray.

It targets southern Zabul, Helmand, eastern Paktika and western Farah and Herat provinces,

where groups of insurgents and their commanders, unhappy with the Taliban's leadership, have defected to a commander named Mullah Mohammad Rasool.

Afghan and U.S. officials said Mullah Rasool's faction and other fractious Taliban groups have been receiving cash, ammunition and weapons from the Afghan government.

A spokesman for Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said there is no alliance between any Afghan agency and any Taliban group. The Afghan government does not support any Taliban groups and we categorically reject such claims as baseless, said the spokesman, Sayed Zafar Hashemi.

The Taliban faction led by Mullah Rasool has accused a rival Taliban faction as well as Pakistan of spreading propaganda linking them to the government. We do not receive any assistance from the government and we have no relationship with them, said Maulvi Ghulam Mohammad Hotak, a commander under Mullah Rasool.

The U.S.-led force in Afghanistan also denies meeting or supporting any members of the group. In response to queries about coalition resources and facilities being used to assist Mullah Rasool's group, a coalition spokesman said it was possible that the breakaway Taliban factions have been able to acquire some weapons or other equipment, but they weren't given to the insurgents directly or indirectly.

The program carries significant risks. Recruited Taliban commanders, who have yet to commit to peace talks with the government, may turn against Afghan and foreign forces in the country with the ammunition supplied to them, Afghan and U.S. security officials said.

But Afghan officials familiar with the program said they are willing to run such risks if the potential outcome is a weakened Taliban.

It's a game. The tactics of war: Sometimes a friend, and sometime a foe, said a senior Afghan Special Forces battalion commander who has been involved in supporting Mr. Rasool's faction. We are military people. We execute orders.

When two Taliban factions clashed in March in the Zerkoh valley, an opium-rich region in Herat province, Afghan Special Forces teams under his command rolled in to rescue a favored Taliban commander loyal to Mullah Rasool.

Backed by Afghanistan's army and police, they cleared a path for the commander, Nangialai Khan,

and his footsoldiers to escape to a nearby government compound, according to Special Forces soldiers who participated in the operation and a local militia commander who joined the favored Taliban group in battle.

We informed the government here, said the militia commander, Mohammad Haji Amir Karimi, who is also the leader of a provincial tribal council. Mr. Karimi said he received official approval ahead of the mission and was rescued by the government after he was surrounded by the rival Taliban group. And the government helped us, he said.

Since those events in March, the Afghan intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security, has provided Mr. Nangialai with weapons, cash and ammunition needed to continue fighting his rival for control over the valley, according to a U.S. coalition official as well as Afghan Special Forces members who maintain contact with the group. Mr. Nangialai couldnt be reached for comment.

Over nearly four decades, the U.S. has tried to influence the outcomes of Afghanistans myriad conflicts by picking sides and providing money and weapons to the chosen faction. It trained and armed the mujahedeen against the Soviets during the occupation of the 1980s; the rival groups turned against each other after the Soviet-backed government collapsed.

When the Taliban were in power, the U.S. backed groups that helped overthrow the fundamentalist regime in 2001 and install President Hamid Karzai, a close ally at the time. Despite providing millions of dollars to Mr. Karzais government, the relationship soured and the former ally left office having refused to sign a deal to keep U.S. troops in the country.

The Afghan governments efforts come as attempts to restart peace talks with the Taliban have crumbled. Since they were ousted from power in 2001, the Taliban have waged an increasingly deadly insurgency in the country. A truck bomb claimed by the Taliban in April killed more than 60 people in the Afghan capital.

Afghan and U.S. officials say Mullah Rasools faction is more likely to engage in talks, but officially it maintains the same position as the main Taliban group, demanding the withdrawal of all foreign troops and the establishment of Shariah law as a condition for peace: If these conditions are not met, we will not make a peace deal with the government, said Mullah Manan Niazi, a senior aide.

Afghan security officials familiar with the effort to split the Taliban said it has been successful in some provinces and has brought the groups legitimacy into question. Another key objective has been to keep disgruntled Taliban commanders from joining up with an emergent Islamic State. Its

a very complex war, an Afghan intelligence agency official based in Kabul said. Sometimes you need to be on every side.

Senior Afghan Special Forces members in western Afghanistan said the CIA supplied the Taliban splinter group with cash and equipment, through the Afghan spy agency, including three vehicles with satellite trackers to track movements of allied Taliban commanders.

Despite the efforts to support him, Mullah Rasools Taliban faction has suffered some devastating battlefield defeats in places like Herat and Zabul, according to provincial government and security officials. In Helmand, it has made little if any progress. In Paktika province, Afghan intelligence officials described an attempt to support a renegade leader known as Obaidullah Honar, who was loyal to Mullah Rasool, with cash and weapons, only for him to die alongside many of his men in a battle with the Taliban's main group.

In Herat province, Shindand district, which is rich in opium and contains one of Afghanistan's largest airfields, has slid under the control of the main Taliban organization over the past year. Military convoys are routinely attacked. Afghan Special Forces teams often travel undercover, speeding through clusters of Taliban-controlled mud-brick villages.

Some Afghan Special Forces members, who see themselves as an elite force trained to carry out special missions, said they have been frustrated by Mr. Nangialai's repeated losses at the hands of the rival group and see their efforts as futile because there is no attempt to hold the ground after their operations.

Officials at Special Forces headquarters denied they are backing one rival Taliban group against the other.

Both sides have committed atrocities against the people, said General Shir Mohammad Andiwal, the 207th Corps Brigade commander, referring to both factions of the Taliban. We are military, for us, they both are equally dangerous.

In Shindand district, Afghan forces are largely confined to their bases and district center buildings are attacked regularly. The governor's office is riddled with bullet holes, but an 18-man team of Afghan Special Forces remains stationed on the upper floor of building to keep it from falling into Taliban hands.

Special Forces soldiers said Afghan and U.S. intelligence agency officers flew Mr. Nangialai back to Kabul for meetings following his retreat. Afghan and U.S. officials said the Taliban commander has been rearmed and is preparing a counter attack.

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Kaynak/Source: