
US GENERAL: RUSSIA MAY BE SUPPLYING TALIBAN FIGHTERS

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Russia is 'perhaps' aiding the Taliban in fighting against US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, US general alleges.

The top US general in Europe said on Thursday he has seen growing Russian influence on the Afghan Taliban, and raised the possibility that Moscow was helping supply the fighters.

Russia has been critical of the US over its handling of the war in Afghanistan - now in its 16th year - where the Soviet Union fought a bloody and disastrous war of its own in the 1980s.

But Russian officials have denied they provide aid to the Taliban, which is contesting large swaths of territory and inflicting heavy casualties, and say their limited contacts are aimed at bringing the group to the negotiating table.

"I've seen the influence of Russia of late - increased influence in terms of association and perhaps even supply to the Taliban," Army General Curtis Scaparrotti, who is also NATO's Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, told a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing.

Taliban capture key Afghan district; 9 police killed

He did not elaborate on what kind of supplies might be headed to the Taliban or how direct Russia's role might be.

Government losing ground to Taliban

Taliban officials have told Reuters news agency the group has had significant contacts with Moscow since at least 2007, but added Russian involvement did not extend beyond "moral and political support".

NATO troops have been fighting in Afghanistan since a US-led invasion in late 2001, following the September 11 attacks.

About 13,000 NATO service members are in Afghanistan - the bulk of them American - under its Resolute Support training mission.

Scaparrotti said the stakes were high. More than 1,800 American troops have been killed in fighting since the war began.

His comment goes one step further than remarks last month by General John Nicholson, the US commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan.

Nicholson testified that Russia is giving the Taliban encouragement and diplomatic cover in order

to undermine American influence and to defeat NATO, but he did not address whether Russia is supplying the group.

The US in the 1980s supplied Afghan mujahidin fighters with high-tech weapons as they battled the Soviet Red Army.

After more than 15 years of war, US generals say the Afghanistan conflict is stuck in a stalemate with the Taliban continuing to carry broad regional influence, and NATO-backed Afghan security forces struggling to make progress.

Kaynak/Source: