

By Fred Burton and Scott Stewart

On the morning of Oct. 20, as humanitarian aid worker Gayle Williams walked to work in Kabul, Afghanistan, two men on a motorcycle approached and shot her multiple times before speeding off. The Taliban have claimed responsibility for the assassination of the 34-year-old British citizen from South Africa.

Taliban spokesman Zaibullah Mujahid told The Associated Press that his group killed Williams because she "came to Afghanistan to teach Christianity to the people of Afghanistan." Williams' organization, Serving Emergency Relief and Vocational Enterprises (SERVE), denied the charge. In a message on SERVE's Web site, the organization noted that Williams had worked for nearly two years in Kandahar and Kabul directing projects designed to integrate disabled Afghans into the mainstream educational system. SERVE has a long history of working with the needy and with refugees in Afghanistan. The organization was founded in 1972 to help famine victims in Ghor province, and began to work with Afghan refugees in Pakistan in 1980. Since 1992, the group has focused on work inside Afghanistan, providing assistance to refugees returning to Afghanistan and vocational training for the disabled.

In September 2007, we discussed the burgeoning kidnapping industry in Afghanistan and how the Taliban were beginning to focus on humanitarian workers - not only as a moneymaking enterprise, but also as a political lever. Indeed, reports from organizations such as the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO) and the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief indicate that attacks on aid workers have increased dramatically in 2008. According to ANSO, the 19 humanitarian aid workers killed in the first half of 2008 surpassed the 15 killed in all of 2007, and the death toll has continued to mount.

The brazen attack against Williams follows other deadly attacks against aid workers in August and September. On Aug. 13, a marked International Rescue Committee vehicle was attacked in a small-arms ambush in Logar province. The attack resulted in the deaths of one U.S. citizen, two Canadian citizens and an Afghan driver. On Sept. 14, a suicide bomber attacked a marked U.N. Assistance Mission for Afghanistan vehicle in the Spin Buldak district of southern Kandahar province. Two Afghan doctors - working to inoculate Afghan children against polio - and their driver died in the attack.

The increase in attacks against humanitarian workers shows that the Taliban have made a strategic decision to target them. Additionally, from the targetting of non-Christian workers, it is obvious that the issue goes much farther than just a desire to combat proselytism. The Taliban clearly see Afghanistan's many foreign missionary and secular humanitarian aid organizations as supporting the Afghan government, and they believe that driving these organizations out of Afghanistan will be a blow to the government's efforts to promote stability in the country.

Because of this, we anticipate the Taliban will continue to target aid workers in the country, and

not just those connected to Christian organizations. The targeting of humanitarian aid workers goes far beyond Afghanistan, however. And the practice is becoming a point of contention between jihadist ideologues and militant groups.

The Somalian example

A similar campaign by jihadist militants designed to force humanitarian workers out of a country has been under way for the past few years in Somalia. Chaos has reigned in Somalia since the late 1970s, becoming a full-blown humanitarian crisis and civil war in the early 1990s. Somalia has never really recovered from that war. Incessant violence still rages, and because of the violence, there are currently millions of internally displaced people - aka refugees - dependent on foreign humanitarian aid for survival. According to U.N. estimates, 3.2 million Somalians (or 43 percent of the country's population) are dependent on such aid.

The Islamist militants in Somalia are fighting the government of President Abdullahi Yusuf and the Ethiopian troops keeping Yusuf in power. The militants understand the importance of international aid to internal stability, and have sought to use attacks against aid as a weapon against the government. Groups such as the al Qaeda-linked al Shabab have launched many attacks against humanitarian aid workers since 2006 and have been able to use kidnapping and assassination to drive most of the foreign aid workers out of the country.

Even with the foreign aid workers gone, the militants have continued their attacks against World Food Program (WFP) shipments and Somalian employees of aid organizations. In the past week alone, two U.N. employees were assassinated in Somalia.

On Sept. 17, Abdenasser Adan Muse, a senior program assistant for the WFP, was shot three times as he left a mosque in the town of Merca. On Sept. 19, Mukhtar Mohammed Hassan, a water engineer working with the U.N. Children's Fund, was shot dead in Huddur as he walked with friends after attending a local mosque.

Tensions

Of course, the decision to target humanitarian aid workers significantly impacts the people deprived of the aid such organizations offer, including programs to provide food, water and medical care. One of the things that helped turn the tide of public opinion against the jihadist militants in Iraq - including groups like al Qaeda in Iraq headed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi - was the violence the groups perpetrated against civilians, and among those innocent civilians were employees of nongovernmental organizations.

In addition to the murders of aid workers such as Margaret Hassan of CARE International, militants conducted an attack using a large vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) against the Baghdad headquarters of the United Nations in August 2003. The bombing resulted in the death of Sergio Vieira de Mello, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights in Iraq.

The U.N. headquarters came under attack again in September 2003, and following the second attack, all U.N. personnel were withdrawn from the country, along with many other international

humanitarian aid workers. Just over a month after the second U.N. bombing in Baghdad, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) headquarters in Baghdad was attacked by militants using a powerful VBIED.

But al-Zarqawi's forces are not the only ones who have attacked the ICRC. In addition to the Baghdad attack, ICRC workers have been abducted or attacked by jihadists in several other places, including Ethiopia, Somalia and Afghanistan. Not only have the attacks against ICRC personnel gained the attention of the people denied humanitarian assistance as a result, they have also led to a significant buildup of tensions among jihadist ideologues over the subject of attacks against humanitarian workers.

This tension can be seen in the writings of Isam Mohammed Taher al-Barqawi, more popularly known by the nom de guerre Abu Muhammad Asem al-Maqdisi, considered by many to be the world's leading jihadist theoretician. Since his release from Jordanian custody in March, al-Maqdisi has released a number of new writings on jihad. Unlike other jailed jihadist theoreticians - such as Egyptian ideologue Sayyed Imam al-Sharif, aka Dr. Fadl - al-Maqdisi has not recanted his jihadist beliefs.

In the recently released Chapter 19 of his book "Thoughts on the Fruit of Jihad," al-Maqdisi has taken a clear stand against targeting "genuine" humanitarian organizations. Al-Maqdisi specifically referred to the ICRC, noting how it is a legitimate humanitarian organization with no hidden agenda whose valuable services to the poor and dispossessed should be appreciated.

Al-Maqdisi wrote about his own personal experiences with the ICRC since 1994. Much of his time since then has been spent in prison in Jordan, and according to his writings, he had much positive interaction with the ICRC during that time. During such a prison stint in the mid-1990s, al-Maqdisi became acquainted with al-Zarqawi, who was greatly influenced by al-Maqdisi's teaching. Al-Maqdisi would later repudiate al-Zarqawi over the latter's targeting of Shiite noncombatants and their religious facilities in Iraq, which had caused thousands of deaths.

Al-Zarqawi responded that his former mentor had strayed from the jihadist cause. Al-Maqdisi wrote Chapter 19 in response to incidents such as the 2003 bombing of the ICRC office in Baghdad. In it, he urges jihadist militants to refrain from attacking genuine humanitarian organizations.

Where the rubber meets the road

Al-Maqdisi is widely respected in the Arabic-speaking jihadist world, but we know from historical precedent that al-Zarqawi and company did not follow his philosophy about targeting the Shia and other noncombatants in Iraq when they believed that tactical considerations outweighed such overreaching principles. It is also noteworthy how disregarding al-Maqdisi's guidance to militants in Iraq --and the subsequent blowback - was a significant factor in their downfall.

There is precedent for this type of ideological tension and pressure causing jihadist groups to abandon widely used tactics. One such example was the jihadist beheading videos, which

proliferated after the highly publicized February 2002 video of the beheading of journalist Daniel Pearl by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM) in Pakistan. Jihadists in places like Iraq and Saudi Arabia quickly copied the tactic, and it was used in many videos released by these groups in 2003 and 2004.

As this tactic spread, it was condemned by the al Qaeda core leadership. Even though the practice had been begun by KSM, a senior al Qaeda operative, the leadership gauged the response to the videos and deemed the practice to be counterproductive to their overall goals. This condemnation was clearly evident in the letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi intercepted by the U.S. government and released in October 2005. Significantly, the practice of jihadist groups beheading hostages on video has declined markedly since the core al Qaeda leadership expressed their opposition to it.

Al-Maqdisi's stance on the issue of killing humanitarian aid workers, and specifically ICRC members, is clear, and his stature will cause militant groups to pay attention to his opinion. It should be noted, however, that wiggle room for militants will remain if they claim, as the Taliban did in the Williams case, that the target of their attack was involved in proselytism. The Taliban were undoubtedly already under pressure in that case to justify their assassination of a woman, something considered very unmanly in Afghan culture. Given this evolving intra-jihadist debate, signs should be looked for of a tactical shift in places like Somalia, where attacks against humanitarian organizations have been widespread, or in Afghanistan, where such attacks have been rapidly growing in number.

So far, tactical considerations have outweighed ideological arguments against such attacks, and we see no end in sight to such attacks. But with al-Maqdisi's pronouncement, the pressure against such attacks will surely grow and the topic should spawn a lot of discussion and division in militant circles. This discussion may ultimately lead to a change in tactics.

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