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AP BREAKING NEWS

July 1, 2002

Former Taliban chief describes ignorance of radioactive material

By Charles J. Hanley
ASSOCIATED PRESS

KABUL, Afghanistan — With 10 capsules of "uranium" stuffed into a sock, Taliban officials once drove off in search of buyers or ideas for what to do with the smuggled material, a former Taliban intelligence chief says.

"The Taliban had no experience with such things. They were simple mullahs," said Mohammed Khaksar, himself a mullah, or Muslim cleric.

In an interview, Mullah Khaksar told of former colleagues in the 1996-2001 government selling supposed uranium to one another, and said he advised supreme leader Mullah Mohammed Omar to stay out of the trade because the goods appeared fake.

Mullah Khaksar, a former deputy interior minister, painted a picture of Afghan ignorance and bumbling in the business of nuclear weapons.

Other reports suggest a more serious pursuit:

• In October 2000, a Russian Security Council official told an international conference the Taliban had tried but failed to hire a former Soviet nuclear specialist.

• The U.S. indictment of Osama bin Laden, who was shielded by the Taliban in Afghanistan, said his al Qaeda network had sought the elements of nuclear weapons since 1993.

• Captured al Qaeda lieutenant Abu Zubaydah told U.S. interrogators the Afghanistan-based terror group was working on a "dirty bomb," a conventional bomb that would scatter radioactive material, U.S. officials said.

Only sketchy evidence has emerged inside Afghanistan: a crude diagram of how a nuclear weapon works, said by U.S. intelligence officials to have been found in an al Qaeda location in Kabul; and the travels of two Pakistani nuclear scientists to Afghanistan during Taliban rule.

Mullah Khaksar recalled mullahs passing around capsules of something they believed to be uranium, material weighing 4 to 5 pounds that he understood came from ex-Soviet Central Asia.

The former Taliban aide said one government official bought a capsule of the material for the equivalent of \$55 in local currency, and then sold it to his own higher headquarters

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for many times that amount.

"I don't think it was real uranium," Mullah Khaksar said. Even if it was, it would need to have been highly enriched with the uranium-235 isotope — a rare commodity — and weigh several times that amount to be of likely weapons use.

At one point, Taliban officials "put 10 capsules into a sock and drove to Kandahar," Mullah Omar's base, Mullah Khaksar said. "I think they wanted to sell it. I think Mullah Omar was intent on selling it. One day I told him: 'Don't spend money on this stuff. I don't think it's real.'"

Another circumstance suggests less than intense interest: Cobalt-60 and other radioactive substances, potentially useful for a "dirty bomb," sat at a hospital and a university physics lab in Kabul throughout the Taliban period, without being tampered with. International authorities secured the substances three months ago.

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