Former Taliban chief describes ignorance of radioactive material

By Charles J. Hanley
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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.
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.