



Exclusive Interview with Taliban Spokesman

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[On January 4, 2008, NEFA Foundation Investigator Claudio Franco conducted a telephone interview with Taliban spokesman Zahidullah Mujahid. During the interview, Mujahid strongly denied any suggestion that Taliban elements in either Pakistan or Afghanistan were behind the recent assassination of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. The Taliban spokesman also denied that two European diplomats expelled from Afghanistan in late December were involved in any negotiations with Taliban officials.]

Q: "After losing Musa Qala it has been reported that the Taliban have suffered a big blow. Will you try to recapture the district?"

A: "It is not the target of the Mujahideen [Taliban forces] of the Islamic Emirate to keep and retake areas with losses. I mean that keeping control there is not the responsibility or duty of the Mujahideen - their duty is to inflict casualties on the enemy. It is true that they have taken Musa Qala, but three days ago in the area of Chinaro, located just five kilometres away from Musa Qala, fighting is still going on. Every day, the Coalition forces and their puppet soldiers suffer casualties."

Q: "After government forces took Musa Qala, they found tons of raw opium stored there; did the Taliban know about this?"

A: "No. The Taliban are not trading in opium. The Taliban want to fight their enemy and defeat them. Those who are dealing in opium are others, smugglers with nothing to do with the Taliban. As to those who were keeping the opium, the Taliban did not have any authority over them. The Taliban are against drugs. During the Taliban regime, the whole of Afghanistan was drug-free; at the time, nobody would dare to keep even a mun [7 kilograms] of drugs in their houses. This is a present of the people who have occupied Musa Qala and other parts of Afghanistan [a present by the Coalition and the present Government to the people of Afghanistan]. I strongly reject this, the Taliban were neither involved nor did they know anything about the opium found in Musa Qala."

Q: "The late Commander, Mullah Dadullah, who was killed last year, said: "Opium is our nuclear weapon against the West". Do the Taliban still agree with his views?"

A: "It might be the opinion of common people; I do not think Mullah Dadullah ever thought like this. At the time of the Taliban regime, the common people were arguing that if the West can rely on nuclear weapons, then Afghans should grow poppy. However, during the time of the Islamic Emirate, poppy cultivation was totally banned. If you say that Mullah Dadullah had stated this, it must have been during the Taliban regime."

Q: "Recently, Mullah Omar sacked Mansour Dadullah as commander of the Taliban. What will happen to his followers [his fighters]?"

A: "We have our Emir [leader] and organizational structure; the leader oversees those who are working under him. If somebody is found violating our principles, he can be removed. We obey our Emir, as long as his decisions are in accordance to Islamic principles. He can remove anyone who is not working according the movement's principles and replace him with another person. Our Emir said that he [Mansour] is no longer a commander."

Q: "If Mansour Dadullah does not obey or accept the order, how will you react? Will you try to arrest him?"

A: "No. Because he [Mansour] said himself that if Emir-ul-Momineen [Commander of the Faithful] issued an order for his execution, he would accept it. So I do not think he will oppose the removal order."

Q: "Are you saying that he has accepted the removal order?"

A: "He accepted it before [it happened, theoretically] and he's accepting it now."

Q: "There are rumours that he was sacked because he had negotiated with the British or the UN...?"

A: "No. That is not true. The Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate, including Mansour Dadullah, insist that there should be no talks with the foreigners. This may be a rumour and it is not true. He was not sacked because he met the British or others."

Q: "Are you denying reports about negotiations between the UN and the Taliban? Here the media say that a negotiator, Michel Semple, who was in Afghanistan, had good contacts with the Taliban. Can you confirm these contacts?"

A: "No one by the name of Michel Semple has contacted the Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate. It is possible that he might have had contact with other people. These would be personal contacts and they might have acted as agents, but it is not true that he met any top commanders, or established any influence over the Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate."

Q: "You mean that you are against negotiations with NATO, the British or others?"

A: "This is something related to the future. We will agree to negotiations when they [the Coalition] leave our country; they came and occupied everything by force, so it is clear that there should be no negotiations, because we consider them occupiers, and no negotiations are possible with occupiers."

Q: "If we return briefly to Mullah Mansour being sacked: has he already been replaced?"

A: "Nobody has been appointed yet. It is possible that in the coming days the Shura [Council] will be convened and will choose a replacement. God willing we will then announce that."

Q: "Let's come to the relationship between Hezb-e-Islami and the Taliban. You are both fighting the government - how are your relations with Hezb-e-Islami? Do you have any coordination with them or not?"

A: "Whoever is opposing the crusaders and the occupiers is our brother. But the way of conducting activities against the Coalition or the government may be different. However, there are no differences between us, we are both against the occupiers."

Q: "Al Qaeda is also opposing these forces, do you have any contacts with them? What is the extent of your coordination with Al Qaeda?"

A: "As [a renowned scholar] once said that whoever is against British rule, even a dog barking, we welcome him and will not oppose him."

Q: "Recently Pakistan witnessed a wave of violence in the aftermath of Benazir Bhutto's assassination - who could be responsible? And who has profited from her killing? How did you react?"

A: "The Islamic Emirate expressed its position at the time, saying that these unfortunate events are caused by the Americans and their puppets and have affected Afghanistan and neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. So we think that the Bhutto killing is the work of the Americans and Western intelligence. In order to divide Muslims, they ignite fighting among them and take advantage. As a result, Muslim countries become unstable, and not the Western countries."

Q: "The government of Pakistan has blamed Al Qaeda and Baitullah Mehsud [Leader of Pakistani Taliban in Waziristan] - what do you think of this claim?"

A: "No. They denied any involvement in carrying out this act themselves, because Benazir was not their target. They have said Benazir was a woman, and their tribal tradition does not allow killing a woman."

Q: "Is there coordination between you and Baitullah Mehsud?"

A: "There is an ideological proximity. But there is no such thing as us taking orders from them or the other way around. They are carrying out their activities in their own area and our concentration is focused on Afghanistan, not anywhere else."

Q: "Do you have any cooperation with Al Qaeda, Uzbeks or Pakistani Taliban? This is claimed from time to time by the Kabul government."

A: "No. The Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate were trained at the time of the anti-Soviet Jihad; they were trained at that time. So the Mujahideen do not need any such help from Al Qaeda and others."

Q: "Recent reports based on the claims of NATO and the Afghan government say that in different parts of Afghanistan the Taliban are suffering great losses. How do you recruit new fighters? Do the Taliban have any strategy for recruitment?"

A: "The legitimate struggle of the Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate is based on the true belief that we are fighting for the sake of Allah almighty. When a person holds this belief then there will be no reduction of recruits. When someone embraces martyrdom another will come forward and fill his place. We are sure that there will be no shortage of recruits, because our goal is achieving the happiness of Allah and establishing Islamic rule in the country. When the goal and aim is sacred, it is for sure that there will be no failure, and the number of Mujahideen will increase by thousands."

Q: "Mr. Mujahid, you said that you are fighting for the sake of Allah almighty, so is the struggle limited to Afghanistan, or if you get the opportunity will you take the struggle to the West?"

A: "Those who are in control of the Parliament [in Afghanistan] today had the same slogan [faced the same issue], but they failed. We will look at the circumstances, our responsibilities and abilities. It will become clear later."

Q: "If we return to the assassination of Benazir Bhutto once again, do you think there was any involvement of the Pakistani government?"

A: “As I said before, this is the result of their internal differences. As far as who will gain from this, the [Pakistani] government or [Pakistan People’s] Party, it is not our concern. But we say that this was an act of tyranny against her, whoever carried it out, and they have not done a good thing.”

Q: “Some NATO members such as Italy and Germany are not taking direct part in military operations in Afghanistan, what message you would like to convey to their nations or governments?”

A: “It is clear that anyone who is cooperating with them [those NATO members who are fighting the Taliban], we consider them our enemy. So our message to these nations is not to sacrifice their lives for American interests. They should question their monarchs, presidents and prime ministers about why their people should sacrifice themselves for others. We ask these people to put pressure on their own governments to stop dying for American interests.”