

DEXTER FILKINS' BUSY WEEK

Dexter Filkins' story reporting that a top, corrupt, Hamid Karzai aide is on the CIA payroll is not, by itself, all that interesting.

Mohammed Zia Salehi, the chief of administration for the National Security Council, appears to have been on the payroll for many years, according to officials in Kabul and Washington. It is unclear exactly what Mr. Salehi does in exchange for his money, whether providing information to the spy agency, advancing American views inside the presidential palace, or both.

But read it in conjunction with Filkins' other two stories this week. His week started, after all, with the equally unsurprising story that Abdul Ghani Baradar's capture some months ago may have been orchestrated by Pakistan's ISI to prevent peace negotiations between Karzai's government and the Taliban. That story relies on both Pakistani officials boasting of their ploy, Afghan officials explaining how they attempted to negotiate peace, and a Pakistani spiritual leader talking about his role in the attempted negotiations. It includes the allegation—made by a former Afghan official and a NATO official—that Ahmed Wali Karzai had met with Baradar. But perhaps most interesting for our purposes is this passage:

Some American officials still insist that Pakistan-American cooperation is improving, and deny a central Pakistani role in Mr. Baradar's arrest. They say the Pakistanis may now be trying to rewrite history to make themselves appear more influential. It was American intelligence that led to Mr. Baradar's capture, an American official said.

"These are self-serving fairy tales,"

the official said. "The people involved in the operation on the ground didn't know exactly who would be there when they themselves arrived. But it certainly became clear, to Pakistanis and Americans alike, who we'd gotten."

Other American officials suspect the C.I.A. may have been unwittingly used by the Pakistanis for the larger aims of slowing the pace of any peace talks.

That is, among Filkins' American sources, one side denies Pakistan would be so tricky with the US (read, the CIA). That person calls the entire story "self-serving fairy tales." And the other side "suspect[s] the CIA may have been unwittingly used by the Pakistanis."

That is, among Filkins' American sources, this story is a debate over whether the CIA is incompetent or not.

Now move to Tuesday's story. The headline reports another case of civilian killings by vaguely described "special forces."

Details were sketchy, but the governor of Tala Wa Barfak, a district in Baghlan Province, said the Afghans had been killed in the village of Naik early Sunday by what appeared to have been a raid carried out by special forces.

The governor, Mohammed Ismail, said a group of tribal elders he had sent to the village had returned with details. Among the dead were two women and a child, he said. Six of the dead were found in Naik, and two more villagers were found later in a field farther away, he said.

"It was a cruel act against the civilians," he said.

Witnesses said the raid began Sunday at 2 a.m., when a number of helicopters descended on Naik. Groups of commandos

entered a pair of houses, where the gunfire began, the witnesses said.

So a story of “special forces” apparently fucking up again, along with some context on how counterproductive such fuck-ups are. Curiously, though, this Filkins story (truly, this has been a very busy week) also reports a small group of Taliban fighters turning in their arms.

Also in northern Afghanistan, a group of 21 Taliban fighters surrendered their weapons and gave up fighting last week, officials said Tuesday. The surrender offered a glimpse of what Afghan and American officials hope might one day grow into a larger movement.

The fighters, led by a Taliban commander named Mullah Obeidi, gathered Friday at a government building in Muqoor, a district in Badghis Province, and promised to fight no more. Each of the erstwhile fighters received a “re-integration certificate” and congratulations from several hundred tribal elders who had gathered to celebrate.

This balances the fuck-up of the special forces against success of the strategy the Barader capture was supposed to thwart—the formation of an Afghan peace without Pakistani involvement. Of special note, one of the fighters described giving up the fight when he realized his instructions—coming from Pakistani advisors—did not serve the interests of Afghanistan.

His commander, Mr. Obeidi — as well as Taliban advisers who had traveled from Pakistan — urged him to attack construction crews upgrading the national highway. The road runs through Badghis and links the province to the rest of Afghanistan. “If you see the engineers or the laborers, try your best

to kill them,' " Mr. Karim said. "This is what our Pakistani advisers were telling us."

So to follow-up the story on Pakistan's apparent role in thwarting efforts to get Taliban fighters to turn over their arms, a former Taliban fighter blames the Pakistanis for anti-Afghan advice.

See how these themes keep repeating across these stories?

Which brings us back to the shocking! news that two people close to Karzai, one of them the brother alleged to have met with Barader in Filkins' earlier story, have been getting payments from the CIA. There's actually some very interesting details about the investigation into Afghanistan's payment courier system, New Ansari, which has been key to the export of billions out of Afghanistan (I hope to return to this). But there is, of course, discussion of how American sources are split over how central the fight against corruption should be in our overall Afghan strategy.

The ties underscore doubts about how seriously the Obama administration intends to fight corruption here. The anticorruption drive, though strongly backed by the United States, is still vigorously debated inside the administration. Some argue it should be a centerpiece of American strategy, and others say that attacking corrupt officials who are crucial to the war effort could destabilize the Karzai government.

The Obama administration is also racing to show progress in Afghanistan by December, when the White House will evaluate its mission there. Some administration officials argue that any comprehensive campaign to fight corruption inside Afghanistan is overly

ambitious, with less than a year to go before the American military is set to begin withdrawing troops.

"Fighting corruption is the very definition of mission creep," one Obama administration official said.

Others in the administration view public corruption as the single greatest threat to the Afghan government and the American mission; it is the corrupt nature of the Karzai government, these officials say, that drives ordinary Afghans into the arms of the Taliban.

[snip]

"Corruption matters to us," a senior Obama administration official said. "The fact that Salehi may have been on our payroll does not necessarily change any of the basic issues here."

So after stories about who is doing more damage, special forces or credulous CIA, the debate shifts to whether it is more important to crack down on the corruption within Karzai's government—even if it means cracking down on CIA's key assets—or whether we have to deal with corruption because that's the way of the world.

Boy, Dexter Filkins sure has had an interesting week cataloging the sniping within American strategy, huh? Mind you, I'm not complaining about Filkins' reporting (though his descriptions of anonymous sources doesn't seem to comply with the NYT's policy on identifying the motives for these anonymous leaks—it's sure be useful to readers if he'd place his sources a little better, because no one on the inside is really fooled by these anonymous citations).

But he does seem to be the focus of a lot of competing leaks of late.