

On the Hunt for Mullah Omar

U.S. troops know where he's roaming. Why haven't they nabbed him yet?

By JAMES GRAFF

KNOWING ROUGHLY WHERE TALIBAN leader Mullah Mohammed Omar is hiding is one thing. Finding him is another. For months Afghan government and U.S. military sources have believed that the man who gave sanctuary to Osama bin Laden has found refuge of his own in an arc of inaccessible mountains north of Kandahar. It is a place where even a half-blind cleric on the run has factors in his favor: a harsh environment, strong tribal ties, loyal friends and a population increasingly disposed to hate the Americans. Little wonder, says a senior Kandahar police commander, that after months of searching, the coalition forces "are not one inch closer to getting hold" of Omar.

To close in on him, U.S. forces would need to land an inspired bit of intelligence on the more precise whereabouts of the Taliban chieftain—or else benefit from more dumb luck than they have had so far. Why not just invade and scour the area where the locals say he is roaming? "It's strong Taliban country," notes

a senior U.S. military official. A blind search would be too dangerous to undertake for just one guy.

The Pentagon last week denied reports that the July 1 air operation that killed up to 48 civilians at a wedding party in the Deh Rawod district in southern Uruzgan province was a botched attempt to kill the Taliban leader. But a senior military official maintains that whatever the Pentagon has said subsequently, Omar was the original target: "They thought they had him." Omar is originally from Deh Rawod, and U.S. Army spokesman Major Gary Tallman told reporters in Afghanistan that "multiple intelligence sources" suggested he was in the area at the time of the U.S. raid. The bride at the devastated party was the niece of Mullah Bradar, a top Taliban official who is suspected of being among those protecting Omar—just the kind of man he might want to honor with his presence. Two weeks after that debacle, Omar was spotted northwest of Deh Rawod, in Baghran, looking "clearly depressed," according to a



senior Afghan intelligence official. Local people the intelligence officer's agent thought had lost family members in the wedding party bombing.

In the aftermath of that raid, coalition forces can hardly count on friendly tips from mountain folk of Uruzgan, Zabul, Helmand and Kandahar provinces to close in on Omar. "They are his people; he is their leader, and he is also their guest," says Gul Akhund, a police

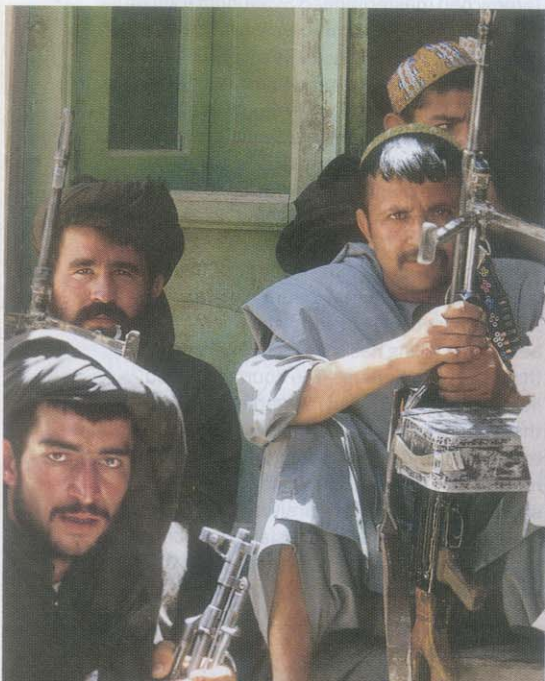
commander in Kandahar. "They must find him." Should those bonds prove feeble, Taliban know how to drive home the consequences of treachery. In mid-July, Mullah Bradar was seen on horseback in Helmand province, in the mountainous Washir. About the same time, a letter, or propaganda leaflet, was placed or inspired by Bradar, was plastered to a Washir mosque, threatening anyone who collaborated with the government.

Even if locals wanted to turn Omar in, most would have a hard time identifying him, given how reclusive and photophobic he is. "You can't find people who can call Mullah Omar out and say, 'This is Mullah Omar,'" says al-Hajji Mullah Khaksar, a former Taliban deputy minister. Given the chance of turning an Omar ally, coalition forces have had to place hope on two-man U.S. military "reconnaissance and surveillance" teams hidden in the region, watching the valleys and villages for signs of movement.

Pentagon sources say that civilian casualties at Deh Rawod have not cooled their ardor for catching him. Though bin Laden remains the more wanted man, the image of Omar, the ghost of the mountains, already imbued in popular imagination with mystic powers of evasion, is one vexation the Taliban—and its Western backers—want to banish once and for all.

—Rep Michael Duffy and Douglas Waller/Washington Post; Michael Ware/Kandahar

ELUSIVE In the search for the Taliban chief, top, the U.S. has to rely on local help, left



SCOTT NELSON—GETTY IMAGES

