Data Leaks Persist From Afghan Base

A computer drive sold at a bazaar for $40 may hold the names of spies for the United States who inform on the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

By Paul Watson, Times Staff Writer

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BAGRAM, Afghanistan — A computer drive sold openly Wednesday at a bazaar outside the U.S. air base here holds what appears to be a trove of potentially sensitive American intelligence data, including the names, photographs and telephone numbers of Afghan spies informing on the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

The flash memory drive, which a teenager sold for $40, holds scores of military documents marked “secret,” describing intelligence-gathering methods and information — including escape routes into Pakistan and the location of a suspected safe house for Taliban or Al Qaeda fighters apprehended based on the source's intelligence.

The documents appear to be authentic, but the accuracy of the information they contain could not be independently verified.

On its face, the information seems to jeopardize the safety of intelligence sources working secretly for U.S. Special Forces in Afghanistan, which would constitute a serious breach of security. For that reason, The Times has withheld personal information and details that could compromise military operations.

U.S. commanders in Afghanistan said an investigation was underway into what shopkeepers at the bazaar describe as ongoing theft and resale of U.S. computer equipment from the Bagram air base.

The facility is the center of intelligence-gathering activities and includes a detention center for suspected members of Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups flown in from around the world.

"Members of the Army's Criminal Investigation Command are conducting an investigation into potential criminal activity," a statement said.

The top U.S. commander here, Army Lt. Gen. Karl Eikenberry, has ordered a review of policies and procedures for keeping track of computer hardware and software.

"Coalition officials regularly survey bazaars across Afghanistan for the presence of contraband materials, but thus far have not uncovered sensitive or classified items," the statement added.

The credibility and reliability of some intelligence sources identified in the documents is marked as unknown.

Other operatives, however, appear to be of high importance, including one whose information, the document says, led to the apprehension of seven Al Qaeda suspects in the United States.

One document describes a source as having "people working for him" in 11 Afghan cities. "The potential for success with this contact is unlimited," the report says.

Even the names of people identified as the sources' wives and children are listed — details that could put them at risk of retaliation by insurgents who have boasted about executing dozens of people suspected of spying for U.S. forces.
The drive includes descriptions of Taliban commanders' meetings in neighboring Pakistan and maps of militants' infiltration and escape routes along its border with Afghanistan.

In another folder, there is a diagram of a mosque and madrasa, or Islamic school, where an informant said fugitive Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar had stayed in Pakistan.

Another document describes in detail how a member of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency, or ISI, the Taliban's former mentors, tried to recruit an Afghan spying for the U.S. by promising him $500 a month.

Some of the documents can't be opened without a password, but most are neither locked nor encrypted.

Numerous files indicate the flash drive may have belonged to a member of the Army's 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne), based at Ft. Bragg, N.C. The unit is operating in southern Afghanistan, where a U.S.-led coalition is battling a growing insurgency.

Some of the computer files are dated as recently as this month, while others date to 2004. The clerk who sold the computer drive said an Afghan worker smuggled it out of the Bagram base Tuesday, a day after The Times first reported that military secrets were available at several stalls at the bazaar.

The 1-gigabyte flash drive sold at the bazaar Wednesday is almost full and contains personal snapshots, Special Forces training manuals, records of "direct action" training missions in South America, along with numerous computer slide presentations and documents marked "secret."

There is also a detailed "Site Security Survey" describing the layout of the Special Forces unit's "Low Visibility Operating Base" in southwestern Afghanistan. Another document outlines procedures for defending the base if it comes under attack, and there are several photographs of the walls and areas inside the perimeter.

The drive holds detailed information on a handful of Afghan informants identified by name and the number of contacts with U.S. handlers. In some cases, photographs of the sources are attached.

A report on a spy involved with a code-named operation says the Afghan has been used in "cross border operations." But it cautions that an American officer "has come to the conclusion that Contact may or may not be as security conscious as thought to be or expected."

The report describes a potential "low-level source" who reportedly has "brought in active and inactive Taliban and Al Qaeda associates/operators who have expressed a desire to repatriate/end conflict peacefully."

The man is identified as a former ISI agent in the 1980s, during the U.S.-backed mujahedin war against Soviet troops in Afghanistan. He also provided a document on Al Qaeda's cell structure to the CIA, the report adds.

The document also names the man's wife and children and lists his cellphone number.

It describes the informant as very punctual, with a good sense of humor. Politically, it adds, he is "much like a Republican in the United States."

The computer files also provide a rare look at how the U.S. military contracts and pays its Afghan spies, and the commitments they make in signed contracts, written in English.

In a two-page "Record of Oral Commitment," marked "secret" and dated Jan. 28, 2005, a source agreed to work for the U.S. Army by providing information on Al Qaeda, the Taliban and an allied militia, the Hizb-i-Islami, led by fugitive warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

"The source will be paid $15 USD for each mission he completes that has verified information," the agreement stipulates. "This sum will not exceed a total of $300 USD in a 1-month period," the report says. The sum rises to $500 a month for information "deemed of very high importance."

And there are serious consequences for any breaches of the commitment, such as failing to disclose information on the terrorist organizations or missing either of two meetings scheduled for each month.

The penalty for "using his new skills to participate in activities that are deemed" anti-U.S. or against the Afghan government is "termination with prejudice," according to the document.
Another document describes how an Afghan informant for the U.S. military said he was contacted by an official from Pakistan's Embassy, who asked the Afghan to spy for the ISI.

A high-level ISI official then offered the Afghan $500 a month and other incentives, the document says.

The report adds that the ISI official "said that he's looking for an U.S. Embassy employee to aid in the bombing of the embassy that [he] is planning." The ISI official promised he would pay the Afghan $100,000 after the destruction of the embassy in Kabul.

The report concludes: "Everything that [Pakistani] told the Source could be made up or inflated as to look good and exciting to the Source; a possible ploy to get the Source to 'sign up' for the ISI.... However, my 'gut' tells me otherwise, and this guy really is trying to recruit my source for the other side."

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Special correspondent Wesal Zaman in Kabul contributed to this report.