



## Taliban warn of new offensive

### 2,200 Canadian troops stationed in unsettled Kandahar region

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KANDAHAR, Afghanistan (AP-CP) — A purported statement released Thursday by Taliban leader Mullah Omar claimed that large numbers of Afghans were signing up as suicide bombers and that an offensive in the next few months would cause many casualties among foreign and Afghan troops.

The statement was telephoned to Associated Press reporters in Kandahar and the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, by purported Taliban spokesman Mohammed Hanif and was then subsequently received by e-mail from an unidentified sender.

The two-page typed statement ended with a signature supposedly by the fugitive rebel leader. The former Taliban ambassador to Islamabad, Abdul Salam Zaeef, said that it resembled Omar's.

"Young Afghans are coming to mujahedeen camps in large numbers to enrol their names for suicide attacks," the statement said.

"This year, with the beginning of summer, Afghan soil will turn red for the crusaders and their puppets and the occupiers will face an unpredictable wave of Afghan resistance."

Statements attributed to Omar have been released every few months. The previous two — one in January and the other in November — also warned of increased attacks.

Interior Ministry spokesman Yousuf Stanezai dismissed Thursday's statement as propaganda and said the insurgents lacked the strength to launch a major new offensive.

Violence normally escalates at the start of Afghanistan's summer, which is several months away, as the snows melt on the high mountain passes that the insurgents use. Violence last year killed 1,600 people, the most since the Taliban was ousted in 2001.

The past six months has seen a wave of some 30 suicide bombings, but such attacks had been rare here. The Taliban commander in the country's south, Mullah Dadullah, said in December that some 200 people had registered for suicide attacks.

Thursday's statement predicted that 2006 will be "the year of success and victory for Muslims."

"Those who have attacked the holy soil of Islam and their puppets will face shameful defeat because Muslims now understand that Western infidels want to eliminate our beliefs, soil and culture and make us their puppets," the statement attributed to Omar said.

About 2,200 Canadian troops are stationed in southern Afghanistan. They are led by Canadian Brig.-Gen. David Fraser, who took command of a multinational brigade in the Kandahar region at the end of February.

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