

THE WAR

stroy them with devastating firepower, is rising from six to nine.

With most of the country now in anti-Taliban hands, the U.S. bombers have a fast-dwindling set of targets. The only Taliban lines left to pound last weekend were in Kunduz, the last government garrison in the north, and in Kandahar. Last week the Taliban was on the verge of quitting both cities, but defiant Taliban cadres made their stands. In the north, the estimated 6,000 Taliban troops who retreated to Kunduz from the decimated fronts at Mazar-i-Sharif and Taloqan had their supply lines and escape routes cut off. They had two options: surrender to the Uzbek and Tajik rebels or face death. As Taliban soldiers squabbled over whether to negotiate or fight—the Arabs arguing for the latter—U.S. B-52s on Saturday pulverized them while Alliance commanders promised to attack. Alliance troops in Kunduz killed scores of non-Afghan Taliban fighters—the much-loathed Sudanese, Egyptian, Saudi and Chechen graduates of al-Qaeda's terrorist camps—and many more are now at the mercy of both their rebel conquerors and Taliban turncoats. Pakistani volunteers who made it to the border claimed their former comrades beat and fleeced them. Mahsud Khan, 25, told TIME that Taliban troops robbed him at gunpoint as they fled the Alliance advance. "A few minutes earlier, we were in the same trench," he said. "We went there to help them, and they looted us."

The siege of Kandahar was the most convincing sign that the Taliban had come undone. The swiftness of the regime's retreat from the north led some allied commanders to warn that the Taliban was conserving its forces and artillery for a ferocious defense of their southern citadel. But it didn't come. As Pashtun opposition forces encircled the city, the Taliban mustered no more than

sporadic skirmishing. That, and the week's long string of northern defeats, convinced anti-Taliban Pashtun that they could take down the core Taliban warriors in the south and persuade the rest to switch sides; the prospect of Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara fighters sweeping into Pashtun cities was far more harrowing to Taliban soldiers than was surrendering to their Pashtun brothers.

Outside Kandahar, some anti-Taliban

aid. Karzai's men advanced from Uruzgan, north of Kandahar; on the other side of the city, thousands of armed men from southern border towns loyal to another tribal elder, Ghul Agha Sherzai, moved into positions in the hills in the east. A delegation of tribal elders led by Abdul Haqiq, a former *mujahedin* commander, spent three days with Taliban representatives negotiating the handover of Kandahar and three other southern Afghan provinces. Under the plan,

Mullah Naqib, an ex-commander, and Haji Bashar, a businessman allegedly linked to the opium trade, would both become interim leaders of Kandahar. According to sources in the city, a distraught Omar, at times on the verge of weeping, met briefly with the elders on Friday to press them to accept the plan, which would allow him to retain influence in Kandahar and make an unimpeded flight into the mountains. But the elders rejected the presence of these pro-Taliban commanders in Kandahar and vowed to stage a battle for control of the city. The situation remained murky and volatile, but it seemed increasingly unlikely that Omar could mount a credible counterattack.

This may account for why the rhetoric of the Taliban leader took on apocalyptic tones last week that seemed to betray his despair about the fate of his movement and his own dim prospects for survival. From an undisclosed location, Omar broadcast messages predicting his death in battle and naming Mullah Baradar, a former governor in Herat who commanded Taliban troops in Kabul, his successor. Early in the week he gave an interview to the BBC's Pashtu news service in which he predicted "the destruction of America. If Allah's help is with us, this will happen within a short period of time."

But few Afghans listened. "Omar doesn't have the same power he had in the past," says Haqiq, the Pashtun commander. "They keep saying he will fight to the end, but we don't think that's true." Across Afghanistan, people deserted the regime as soon as it started losing, exposing its



ON WATCH: U.S. and allied commandos in the north guarded humanitarian supplies and tried to maintain order

forces mobilized behind Hamid Karzai, a commander who supports the exiled King Mohammed Zahir Shah. Karzai spent weeks working undercover in Afghanistan, drawing on his old tribal networks and recruiting chieftains to join the battle. His strategy was to sever the Taliban from its tribal links, winning over local chiefs with promises of peace and international

BRENNAN LINSLEY/AP