

**Afghanistan** >

# The fall of Sar-i-Pul threatens a commercial hub in Afghanistan's north.

**By Najim Rahim and Thomas Gibbons-Neff**

Aug. 8, 2021

KABUL, Afghanistan — Of the three cities seized by the Taliban in northern Afghanistan on Sunday, Sar-i-Pul, the capital of the province with the same name, garnered fewer headlines and less concern from the international community.

Because of its remoteness, the city had been widely neglected by both the Afghan government and the international aid agencies that flocked to Afghanistan after the U.S. invasion in 2001.

But on Sunday, after more than a month of fighting and airstrikes, the city finally fell to the insurgents, leaving residents grappling with a new power structure and facing the prospect of more violence.

From a military standpoint, the province is of lesser strategic importance. But Sar-i-Pul offers access to untapped natural resources, including oil fields that were recently drilled near the provincial capital and taken over by the Taliban.

By the end of June, the Taliban had captured four districts in Sar-i-Pul as part of their broader offensive in the north. With the province now mostly under their control, the insurgents have positioned themselves to attack Mazar-i-Sharif, an economic hub and capital of Balkh Province, from two different directions: Sar-i-Pul and Jowzjan in the west, and Kunduz in the east.

Sar-i-Pul province itself has a population of around 621,000 people and is ethnically diverse, with ethnic Uzbeks making up a plurality.

Najim Rahim is a reporter in the Kabul, Afghanistan, bureau. @NajimRah

Thomas Gibbons-Neff is a correspondent in the Kabul bureau and a former Marine infantryman. @tmgneff

## Afghanistan ›

- Biden isn't changing the U.S. withdrawal plan, officials say.
- The propaganda war intensifies in Afghanistan as the Taliban gain ground.
- Another provincial capital, Taloan, falls to the insurgents on Sunday.
- When cities fall to the Taliban, those inside face an even harsher reality.
- The U.S. troop withdrawal opened the door for the Taliban's offensive.
- How the Taliban managed to hold on for so long.