

## Fear Sets In as Taliban Seize Former Bastions of Resistance

The Taliban's breakthrough victories across northern Afghanistan have sent despair rippling through the country, as many worry that no corner of the country will be spared.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — The families flooded out of northern Afghanistan by the thousands, standing for hours in overcrowded buses and cramming into taxis to escape the Taliban's swift advance.

By Monday morning, many had arrived at a makeshift shelter in Kabul, the country's capital. They huddled together, recounting how they had watched bombs ravage their neighborhoods while running battles consumed the streets outside.

The Taliban's relentless march across northern Afghanistan has sent panic rippling across the country, as Afghans watched a region that was once the heart of resistance to the southern Taliban insurgency collapse at a terrifying pace. In just four days, the insurgents have seized five provincial capitals across the north and one in the southwest, and they continue to press on in their brutal offensive.

The Taliban's breakthrough victories have further stoked fears that the insurgents could envelop Kabul, and have shattered many Afghans' last hopes that government forces could somehow reverse the onslaught. With the Taliban encroaching on Kabul — a bastion of government control amid the insurgents' onslaught — many fear that no corner of the country will be spared.

"The country is going back to the 1990s," said Noor Agha, 26, who fled to Kabul from Kunduz on Sunday. "We're in another civil war now."

On Monday, the Taliban seized another northern capital, Aybak, the capital of Samangan Province, after brief clashes with government troops. In the neighboring province, despite pledges to begin operations to retake Kunduz, Afghan troops still reeling from the weekend's assault had not carried out any form of a counterattack on the city by nightfall. And security forces evacuated from another northern province, Sar-i-Pul, effectively ceding it to the Taliban who had seized its capital on Sunday.

Yet, amid all the defeat, the administration of President Ashraf Ghani refused to acknowledge the falling capitals. Instead, the central government continued to promote its official talking points that emphasized Taliban deaths and the strength of the Afghan security forces. A spokesman for the Ministry of Defense tweeted Monday that Afghan security forces had repelled Taliban fighters from the capital of another northern province, Baghlan, and other parts of the region. But the message seemed to do little to reassure a panicked public.

"We cannot even trust the government to defend us now," Mr. Agha said. "If I don't pick something up," he added, referring to a weapon, "what will happen to our country?"



Families flooded into Kabul on Monday by the thousands from across northern Afghanistan, setting up makeshift camps in public spaces. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

When the Taliban emerged in the 1990s, the southern and predominantly ethnic Pashtun insurgency had faced fierce resistance from militia groups in the north known as the Northern Alliance. Even when the insurgency seized control of Kabul in 1996, the Northern Alliance deprived the group of a complete takeover for the course of their five-year rule.

But over the past decade, the Taliban have courted fighters in the north, mainly ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks, to lay the groundwork for their current military campaign. They found scores of eager recruits among people who were unhappy with the presence of foreign forces and who despised Northern Alliance leaders for corruption and for cooperating with the American “occupation.”

With the capture of five northern cities in just four days, and more than half of Afghanistan’s 400-odd districts since May, that recruitment strategy appears to have paid off. Now experts warn that if the insurgents are able to conquer the north — squashing the country’s best hope for a grass-roots resistance strong enough to take on the Taliban — the country could fall in their hands completely.

“The north is strategic for the Taliban, because they believe if they can capture these non-Pashtun areas, then they can easily take control of the south and the capital, Kabul,” said Ramish Salemi, a political analyst in Kabul.

On Monday, the Taliban continued their relentless drive, pushing further into Kunduz, the vital economic hub they captured on Sunday. They clashed with government forces on the outskirts of Mazar-i-Sharif, the capital of Balkh Province and another key northern city. And they overran Aybak, the capital of Samangan Province that sits on the main highway that connects Kabul to Afghanistan’s northern provinces.



People who fled from fighting in the north registering in Kabul. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

As the insurgents captured those cities — releasing hundreds of inmates from prisons, hoisting their flag over town squares and sending victorious fighters surging through their streets — they have set off mass panic. Thousands of northern residents have fled their homes, fearing life under Taliban rule or a return of brutal urban combat if government security forces try to retake the cities.

Sayed Mohammad Alizada, 40, a resident of Kunduz, spent more than a month waking up to the unrelenting sound of mortars and gunfire in the distance. Then one night early last month, as the front lines crept deeper into his neighborhood, a mortar landed outside his home. Finally, he fled on Sunday, hours after the Taliban seized the city.

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“I thought if they kept firing mortars, I could lose my entire family, even myself,” said Mr. Alizada, who was injured by crossfire during the battle. “It was the most intense fighting we’ve ever seen.”

Sitting across from an open door in his living room, he had felt the sharp pain of shrapnel tearing through his left shoulder. Within minutes, he and his family crammed into his rickshaw and sped toward the hospital as clashes between government troops and Taliban fighters broke out blocks away.

By the time he left Kunduz on Sunday, the city he knew was almost unrecognizable: The buildings were bullet-riddled. The roads were pockmarked with craters from mortar fire. Outside his house, a mulberry tree had been split in two by a mortar.

His was one of the more than 6,000 families who have been displaced from Kunduz since the Taliban seized the city, according to Mohammad Yousef Khadam, head of emergency situations for Kunduz’s refugees and repatriations department.

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**Who are the Taliban?** The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

Many have fled to Kabul, where a fenced-in basketball court in a park downtown has been transformed into a place of refuge. Displaced people huddled together under makeshift lodging consisting of little more than large olive-green bedsheets stretched across four wooden poles.

As people arrived Sunday night, they searched for any space they could find. Women and children slept side by side on a patchwork of red Afghan rugs. One woman cradling an infant begged for a doctor to visit the camp. She had slept in the biting cold in the park the night before, she said, and her daughter had become sick.

"If we would have stayed maybe we all would have died," said Fariba, 35, who recently arrived at the camp and like many Afghans only goes by one name. At first, she thought the battle in Kunduz would turn in the government's favor, but as shelling increased around her home in recent days, her family decided to flee.



People at a makeshift camp at a park in Kabul. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Some men who fled Kunduz recounted how their neighborhoods had been ravaged by mortar fire. Taliban fighters, the men said, would burst into homes, yelling, "Put your hands up!" Yet outside was no safer. There were running gun battles on the streets, the men said, and stray bullets seemed to be flying everywhere.

Abdul Qadir Toryalay Momeen, 37, gestured to a throng of people around him.

"This number is going to grow," he said.

Mr. Momeen, a butcher in Kunduz, fled the city on Sunday night after one of his sons was wounded by an errant artillery round and lost his hand. The 7-year-old boy is now being treated at the children's hospital in Kabul after spending around 12 hours in a car as he bled.

This was the third time they had fled from their home, he said. The first was when the Taliban briefly captured Kunduz in 2015 and then again a year later, when the Taliban took it again. Both previous times, Afghan forces had pushed the insurgents back with help from U.S. drone strikes.

This time, he says, he fears his family will never return to their home.

In Kunduz, military leaders vowed Sunday night to flush the Taliban out of the city. But battered by months of relentless fighting from an insurgent force energized by their recent victories, they still had not begun an operation by Monday evening. Instead, Taliban forces pushed closer to Kunduz's airport, the last pocket of government control on the outskirts of the city.

The lack of a counteroffensive underscores the highly tenuous position of the Afghan government in the face of the insurgent group's rapid advance into urban centers. Resupply lines to government forces are severed, and the cities and districts still under the government's control — long considered islands under threat by the Taliban — are even more cut off and isolated.

Now, the Afghan government must decide whether to reconstitute its forces around the territory it holds — including Kabul, which could soon come under attack — or try to retake their fallen cities.

U.S. airstrikes in support of the Afghan forces have been muted and prominently concentrated away from the north. On Sunday, as Afghan troops reeled from their defeats, it was clear that the United States was not coming to their rescue.

Jim Huylebroek contributed reporting.