

Taliban Enter Key Cities in Afghanistan's North After Swift Offensive

The setbacks come at a harrowing moment for Afghanistan, just as American and international troops are set to leave the country in coming weeks.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — The Taliban entered two provincial capitals in northern Afghanistan Sunday, local officials said, the culmination of an insurgent offensive that has overrun dozens of rural districts and forced the surrender and capture of hundreds of government forces and their military equipment in recent weeks.

In Kunduz city, the capital of the province of the same name, the Taliban seized the city's entrance before dispersing throughout its neighborhoods. Kunduz was briefly taken by the Taliban in 2015 and 2016 before they were pushed back by American airstrikes, special operations forces and Afghan security forces.

"Right now, I hear the sound of bullets," said Amruddin Wali, a member of Kunduz's provincial council. "The Taliban have appeared in the alleys and back alleys of Kunduz, and there is panic all over the city."

The setbacks come at a harrowing moment for Afghanistan. American and international troops, now mostly based in Kabul, the capital, and at Bagram airfield, are set to leave the country in weeks.

To the west of Kunduz in Maimana, the capital of Faryab Province, Taliban fighters appeared at the city's entrance before moving into the city's periphery. The Taliban clashed with security forces into Sunday night, after a series of takeovers in past days in the capital's surrounding districts. In one such recent battle, the Taliban killed more than 20 of the government's most elite forces. In another, dozens of government troops surrendered together after running low on ammunition.



Afghan security forces at an army outpost in Kunduz that was attacked by Taliban forces last year. Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The looming U.S. withdrawal means Afghan troops will be left without the kind of combat support that has stopped such Taliban offensives in the past.

"If reinforcements come from Kabul, and aircraft support the security forces, the Taliban cannot enter the city," said Sebghatullah Selab, the deputy of Faryab's provincial capital. There was also fighting on Sunday near the entrance of Taloqan, the capital of Takhar, a province that neighbors Kunduz.

U.S. air support in past weeks has been significantly reduced because of restrictive rules of engagement, and many American military aircraft are now based outside Afghanistan. Afghan air power is struggling to make up the difference.

On Friday, Afghanistan's president, Ashraf Ghani, is to meet President Biden at the White House to discuss the U.S. troop withdrawal.

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In the last 24 hours, around a dozen districts have fallen to the Taliban — mostly in the country's north. Since May 1, when U.S. forces officially began their withdrawal from the country, the Taliban — through local mediation, military offensives and government retreats — have taken more than 50 districts, according to data collected by The New York Times.

Only a small number of districts have been retaken by government forces as the defeats have forced Afghan commanders to consider what territory they can hold following the American departure.

But Rohullah Ahmadzai, a defense ministry spokesman, told Al Jazeera Saturday, "There is a new, robust and effective plan to retake areas from which we have pulled back our forces."

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

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.

There are roughly 400 districts in the country, many of which have been contested and controlled by the Taliban for some time. But before the U.S. withdrawal began, only a handful of districts had exchanged hands in the last year. In the past, many such takeovers played out with the Taliban seizing territory that was later retaken by the government.

In May, Taliban forces entered Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand Province in the country's south. Afghan forces and U.S. airstrikes managed to push the insurgents back.



Afghan soldiers fighting Taliban militants in Lashkar Gah last month. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

The current situation does not bode well for government forces and militias under the command of northern Afghanistan's power brokers, some of whom are notorious warlords who have held onto power since the country's civil war in the 1990s and the U.S. invasion in 2001.

Those militia forces, often primarily made up of ethnic Tajik, Uzbek and Hazaras, have long seen the north as their stronghold from the Taliban, a primarily Pashtun group that rose in the south.

Even with adjacent militia forces, government troops are low on morale and are frequently besieged in isolated outposts and bases that can be resupplied only by the Afghan air force. The small group of pilots and aircraft are facing their own array of issues as international forces and maintenance contractors leave the country.

On Saturday, in a clear sign of the deteriorating security situation, the Afghan government appointed a new acting minister of defense, minister of interior and army chief.