

## Taliban Seize Afghan Provincial Capital Just Weeks Before Final U.S. Withdrawal

Zaranj, on the Afghanistan-Iran border, was the first provincial capital to be captured by the insurgents since the Biden administration said it would completely withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — The Taliban captured a regional hub city in western Afghanistan on Friday, officials said, the first provincial capital to fall to the insurgency since the Biden administration announced the full withdrawal of U.S. troops.

The successful takeover marks a significant milestone in the insurgents' relentless march to increase their stranglehold on the Afghan government and retake power in the country. The Taliban have besieged a host of such cities for weeks, and the fall of Zaranj, the provincial capital of Nimruz Province on the Afghanistan-Iran border, is the Taliban's first breakthrough. And it handed the insurgents another crucial international border crossing, the latest in its recent campaign to control road access in Afghanistan.

A regional administrative hub is now completely controlled by the Taliban, an attention-grabbing addition to their steady drumbeat of rural victories in recent months. It was a considerable setback for the government, which has had to contend with simultaneous attacks on capital cities that have stretched military resources desperately thin.

The collapse of Zaranj at the hands of the insurgents was confirmed Friday by Rohgul Khairzad, the deputy governor of Nimruz, and Hajji Baz Mohammad Naser, the head of the provincial council.

"All the people are hiding in their houses in fear of the Taliban," said Khair-ul-Nisa Ghami, a member of the provincial council. "The situation is very worrying. People are scared," she said, adding: "The Taliban captured the city without any fighting."

The collapse of Zaranj, a city of 160,000 people, occurred on the same day that a senior government official was assassinated in Kabul, the capital. It also came as the insurgents pressed hard into other provincial cities, in a day of bleak news for the government.

Situated in the remote southwestern corner of the country, Zaranj has long been considered a lawless border town, acting as Afghanistan's main hub for illegal migration, replete with an illicit economy focused on drug trafficking and fuel. For decades, a steady flow of Afghans displaced by conflict and poverty have flocked to the city's smuggler-owned hotels in order to broker deals to cross into Iran.



By The New York Times

"Nimruz is a place where business interests and criminal networks govern the province," said Ashley Jackson, a researcher with the Overseas Development Institute, adding that a Taliban takeover that disrupted those business interests "would not have been possible."

Taliban fighters faced little resistance in taking Zaranj, said Afghan officials who were not authorized to speak to the news media. They said a deal had been negotiated with the Taliban allowing the authorities in the city to flee across the border to Iran with their families.

The flight of provincial authorities began on Thursday night when the neighboring district of Kang fell, according to the officials. They said people had started looting local government offices and businesses in the city until around 2 p.m. Friday when the Taliban arrived.

Only the local office of the National Directorate of Security, Afghanistan's intelligence agency, put up a fight, but eventually surrendered, the officials said. One of the Taliban's first acts after entering the city was to break into its prison, immediately filling Zaranj's streets with liberated inmates, they added.

Later in the day, Afghan Air Force aircraft circled above the city, dropping strikes on the headquarters of the police and the border brigade, the officials said.

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Mr. Naser, the provincial council head, said that the government had failed to send reinforcements to Zaranj, and that officials had decided to abandon the city in order to avoid casualties. He denied that a deal had been struck with the Taliban.

Since the Taliban began its military campaign in May, the city has buzzed with people looking to leave the country. In early July, around 450 pickup trucks carrying migrants snaked from Zaranj toward crossing points along the Iranian border each day — more than double the number of cars that made the trip in March, according to David Mansfield, a migration researcher with the Overseas Development Institute.

The seizure of Zaranj is a symbolically significant development in the Taliban's campaign, as they have moved away from targeting rural districts to focus on attacking provincial capitals.

The 215th Corps of the Afghan National Army is responsible for security in both Zaranj and Lashkar Gah, the capital of neighboring Helmand Province, which has been under siege for several days. The 215th Corps' leadership had shifted its focus to defending Lashkar Gah, leaving Zaranj vulnerable to capture.



An Afghan soldier firing a machine gun at Taliban positions in Lashkar Gah in May. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

The Taliban also took responsibility for the assassination on Friday of a senior government official in Kabul. Dawa Khan Meenapal, the head of the government's media and information center, was gunned down in a targeted attack. Dozens of officials and civil society figures have been assassinated over the past year, though the Taliban have largely denied responsibility for those attacks.

## 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.

The killing came days after a coordinated attack by the insurgent group on the residence of the acting defense minister that left eight people dead. That assault highlighted the Taliban's ability to strike in the heart of the Afghan capital as they continue their sweeping military campaign.

In northern Afghanistan on Friday, the Taliban attacked another provincial capital, Sheberghan, from five directions, burning houses and wedding halls, and assaulting the police headquarters and the prison. There were numerous civilian casualties, said Halima Sadaf Karimi, a member of Parliament from Jowzjan Province, of which Sheberghan is the capital.

Fighting also continued around the major western city of Herat, in Kandahar city in the south and in other provincial capitals.

The government's response to the insurgents' recent victories has been piecemeal. Afghan forces have retaken some districts, but both the Afghan Air Force and its commando forces — which have been deployed to hold what territory remains as regular army and police units retreat, surrender or refuse to fight — are exhausted.

In the security forces' stead, the government has once more looked to local militias to fill the gaps, a move reminiscent of the chaotic and ethnically divided civil war of the 1990s that many Afghans now fear will return.

In recent weeks, the U.S. military has increased airstrikes on Taliban positions around crucial cities in an effort to give Afghan forces on the ground time to regroup. The strikes alone do little to change the situation on the ground, but have slowed Taliban advances.

The United States is supposed to complete its withdrawal by Aug. 31, at which point the Biden administration has said its military operations will end. That would give the Afghan government mere weeks to reconstitute its security forces to defend the cities and territory still under its control.

At a special session of the United Nations Security Council on Friday, Deborah Lyons, the special representative of the U.N. secretary-general for Afghanistan, warned that without action, the country could descend "into a situation of catastrophe so serious that it would have few, if any, parallels in this century."

Afghanistan, she said, had come to resemble the battlefields of Syria and Sarajevo, with the Taliban making a "strategic decision" to attack urban areas, causing hundreds of deaths among civilians in just the last few weeks. The fighting, she said, comes on top of a punishing drought that has left 18.5 million people in need of humanitarian aid.

She added: "As one Afghan put it to us recently, 'We are no longer talking about preserving the progress and the rights we have gained, we are talking about mere survival.'"

Reporting was contributed by Christina Goldbaum, Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Michael Schwartz.