

Taliban Test Afghan and U.S. Resolve in Talks by Attacking a City

The insurgents have opened an offensive against the capital of Helmand Province even as their negotiators remain at the table in Qatar.

By Mujib Mashal and Taimoor Shah

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KABUL, Afghanistan — The Taliban have opened an offensive on the southern Afghan city of Lashkar Gah, overrunning some of its surrounding security checkpoints and largely cutting it off, even as their negotiators remained at the table for talks with the Afghan government that appear stalled.

While the insurgent attempt to cap the fighting season with high-profile attacks before winter sets in was not unusual for recent years of the two-decade war, the run for a provincial capital amid peace talks suggested that the Taliban still see military bullying as their most effective negotiating tactic.

The attack also appeared to test the limits of how far the United States military — which is drawing down to about 4,500 troops and significantly cutting back air support to Afghan forces since it signed a deal with the Taliban in February — would go to defend its Afghan allies.

The United States has been critical of the Taliban's intensified attacks across Afghanistan, but has stopped short of calling the group's actions a breach of their agreement — even as the American troop withdrawal has continued.

In recent weeks, confusing signals from Washington that President Trump wanted the remaining American troops home before next spring, as laid out in the withdrawal timeline agreed with the Taliban, threatened to further undermine the shaky Afghan government.

In what appeared an attempt to send a clear message to the Taliban and reassure the Afghan forces of continued American support, the U.S. military said it had carried out “several targeted strikes” in defense of the Afghan forces under fire from the Taliban in Helmand Province, of which Lashkar Gah is the capital.



The most recent fighting in Lashkar Gah has displaced at least 1,500 families, officials said. Watan Yar/EPA, via Shutterstock

“The Taliban need to immediately stop their offensive actions in Helmand Province and reduce their violence around the country,” Gen. Austin S. Miller, the commander of the U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, said in a statement. “It is not consistent with the U.S.-Taliban agreement and undermines the ongoing Afghan Peace Talks.”

The Taliban's social media accounts were drumming up the offensive as an effort to take Lashkar Gah, with some accounts posting “minute by minute” updates of what was described as the group's march on the city.

But late Monday, their official spokesman seemed to walk a tight-line that appeared to suggest they were holding back. The spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, said the insurgents were only recapturing areas that were once under their control but that were retaken by Afghan forces several months ago.

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The violence in Helmand was part of a wider uptick in deadly attacks across Afghanistan targeting districts and increasingly choking the highways. In the past 24 hours, the Taliban carried out attacks in 20 of the country's 34 provinces, according to Rohullah Ahmadzai, the spokesman for the Afghan Defense Ministry.

The insurgents made a strong push for Lashkar Gah from several directions since Friday, following a couple of weeks of tightening the noose, officials said.

Ataullah Afghan, the head of the provincial council, said that the Taliban had overrun security checkpoints in the suburbs of Babaji and Chahanjir and closed one of the main roads leading into the city, blowing up parts of it. They also carried out attacks in Nawa, a district neighboring Lashkar Gah. The advances were slowed by airstrikes and fresh government forces that arrived Sunday night, he said.

"They have blocked most of the entrances and exits to the city," said Bashir Ahmad Shakir, a former member of the provincial council in Helmand. "The officials were in deep slumber. The military officials only realized it when the Taliban were almost stepping in to the gates of Lashkar Gah."

Mr. Afghan, the head of the provincial council, attributed the defense failures to a problem that has plagued Afghan forces in the south for years: the presence of a large number of "ghost soldiers" in their ranks.

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"In Babaji and Chahanjir on paper there are 150 police, the salary of 150 police is paid, but only 50 police are present in the whole area, with each outpost getting no more than five or six police," he said. "We shared this problem with higher officials, with the interior minister, with the present of the country, but no action was taken. Now we see the result of those imaginary police."

Lashkar Gah has been one of the most badly affected cities of the long war, with the civilian population bearing the brunt. Families have been repeatedly forced to relocate. The most recent fighting has displaced at least 1,500 families, officials said.

"Last night, a stray bullet hit a pregnant woman and killed the baby," Mariana Cortesi, the coordinator for the Doctors Without Borders hospital in the city, said in a Twitter post. "Miraculously the mother survived and is now receiving maternal and surgical care after a life-saving operation."

The peace talks between the Taliban and a delegation representing the Afghan republic opened last month to much hype in Doha, the capital of Qatar, where the Taliban keep a political office. But progress has been slow, and a month later both sides are stuck on finalizing rules and regulations that will govern their meetings.



Members of the Taliban delegation in Doha, Qatar, last month for talks with the Afghan government. Those talks have stalled. Hussein Sayed/Associated Press

The Taliban are demanding that the rules for the negotiations clearly lay out that the insurgents are sitting down with the Afghan government only as part of their agreement with the United States. The insurgents' stubborn refusal of anything short of that is sending a clear message, Afghan and Western officials say: that the Taliban do not see the Afghan government as equals in negotiations, but rather as a subset of the U.S. military occupation that is ending.

It was unclear how the deadlock could be broken. But Western and Afghan officials said that much depended on how the United States used its leverage to push the sides to a compromise.

Mujib Mashal reported from Kabul, and Taimoor Shah from Kandahar. Najim Rahim contributed reporting from Kabul.