

## Another provincial capital, Tاليقان, falls to the insurgents on Sunday.

By Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Najim Rahim and Sharif Hassan

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Taliban fighters captured another northern provincial capital on Sunday afternoon, local officials said, marking the third city to fall to the insurgent group in a single day.

The fighters had been contained at the gates of Tاليقان, the capital of Takhar Province, since June. But as the Kunduz city center fell to the Taliban on Sunday, the insurgents moved into Tاليقان, just a few miles away, pushing back government forces there in a bout of vicious fighting.

By sunset, the Taliban had seized the police headquarters and the provincial governor's office, said an Afghan official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the developing situation.

Keramatullah Rustaqi, a Takhar provincial council member, said that the city had fallen to the Taliban and that "security forces left Tاليقان to retreat to Farkhar," a neighboring district.

Mr. Rustaqi added that government forces were ambushed along the way.

Tاليقان, an ethnically diverse city with Uzbek, Tajik, Pashtun and Hazara residents, is symbolic to many in the north, and like Kunduz it borders Tajikistan. The city was the operations center of Ahmad Shah Massoud, an anti-Taliban militia commander who was killed just before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in 2001.

"A large number of the Taliban came from Kunduz and the districts of Takhar to capture Tاليقان city, and there is fighting in four directions," said Karimullah Bek, a pro-government militia commander in Tاليقان, a few hours before the city fell. "We need reinforcements."

The exhaustion described by government militia members fighting in Tاليقان is common among security forces across Afghanistan after months of trying to hold back the Taliban. In addition to Kunduz, the insurgents have in just three days seized three other provincial capitals: Sheberghan, the capital of Jowzjan Province; Zaranj, the capital of Nimruz Province on the Afghanistan-Iran border; and Sar-e-Pul, the capital of a northern province of the same name.

"The situation is chaotic, and the front lines are not clear now," said Mohammed Omar, a district governor in Takhar who is leading militia fighters in Tاليقان.

By Sunday afternoon the Taliban had freed hundreds of inmates from the prison in Tاليقان after security forces there fled, said Wafiullah Rahmani, the head of the Takhar provincial council. Breaking into jails and prisons has long been a central part of the insurgent group's military strategy.

The Taliban's capture of Tاليقان is a significant blow to the militia forces that are once again rising to prominence in an echo of the 1990s, when an ethnically charged civil war tore Afghanistan apart and helped the Taliban come to power.

Mr. Massoud's son is now trying to assemble a force much in the way that his father did after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan more than 40 years ago. But the rise of these militia forces has had uneven effects on the battlefield.

The Taliban's recent gains have put them in a position to consolidate their fighters and strengthen an offensive on Mazar-i-Sharif, an important economic hub near the Uzbek border and the capital of Balkh Province.

And once more the Afghan government has been presented with a dilemma: battle to retake the cities they have lost, or focus on defending what cities and provinces remain.

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