

Resistance fighters drive Taliban from 3 districts in the mountains north of Kabul.

The Taliban faced the first armed challenge from former Afghan soldiers and villagers in the mountains north of Kabul.



By Matthew Rosenberg

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The Taliban faced the first armed challenge to their rule as former Afghan soldiers, aided by villagers, drove the militants out of three districts in the mountains north of Kabul, according to former Afghan officials.

The fighting took place in remote valleys on Friday, and details of the clashes were still trickling out. But video posted on social media showed fighters and civilians tearing down the white flag of the Taliban and raising the red, green and black Afghan national flag. In a tweet, the former acting defense minister, Bismillah Khan Mohammadi, called the fighters “popular resistance forces,”

“The resistance” he wrote, “is still alive.”

How long it could survive is another question. Afghan troops were said to have retreated to the area last week as the country’s government and military collapsed around them, and the United States appeared to have little appetite for anything that could anger the Taliban, whose goodwill the evacuation operations at Kabul’s airport is now largely dependent upon.

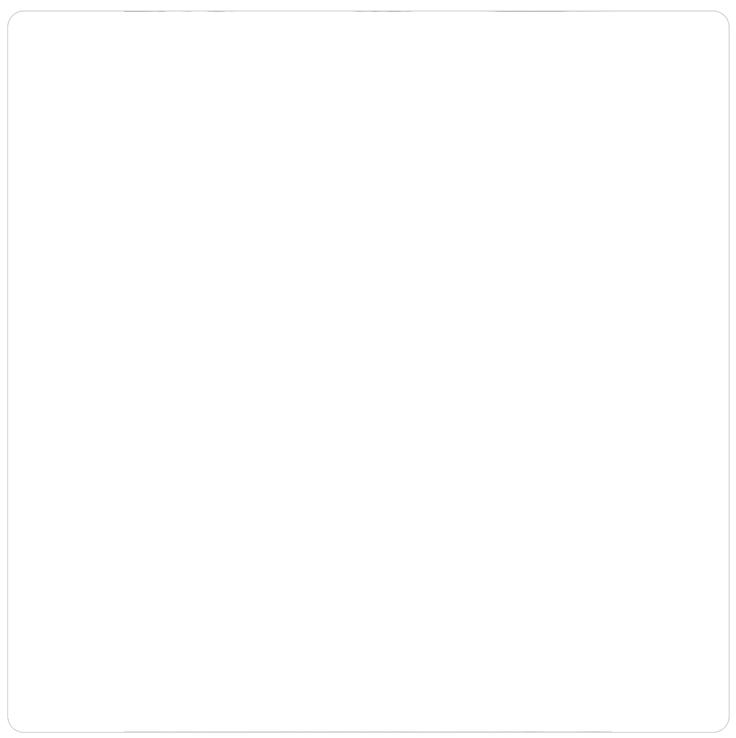
The fighting was reportedly set off by the Taliban conducting house-to-house searches, an ironic twist in a war during which Afghan anger at American searches helped swell the ranks of the militants. Former Afghan officials said the clashes appeared to have been led by a local police chief who knew he was not long for his post under Taliban rule.

The fighting took place in three districts — Pul-e-Hesar, Deh-e-Salah and Bano — that are about 100 miles north of Kabul but only reachable by poor roads that wind through the mountains. The fighters claimed to have killed as many as 30 Taliban and captured nearly two dozen more. A pro-Taliban Twitter account put the militants’ death toll at half that number.

 Natiq Malikzada
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Recapture of Bano district from the Taliban by the People Uprising Forces.





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Less than a week after the Taliban swept into Kabul, the militants are already facing the first stirrings of resistance to their renewed rule. Small groups of women, fearful that the Taliban will try to reimpose their stringent and often brutal interpretation of Islamic law, have braved retribution to publicly demand their rights. Others have simply refused to fly the Taliban's white flag, insisting that the Afghan national flag was the only banner they wanted to fly.

The uprising on Friday took place to the north of the Panjshir Valley, a strategic sliver of territory where a handful of Afghan leaders were organizing a force to resist the Taliban. While former Afghan officials and reports from witnesses on social media suggested the uprising was local and spontaneous, one of the main leaders of the Panjshir resistance movement claimed on Saturday that "we are one."

Amrullah Saleh, who was the country's first vice president until this week, wrote in a text message that his forces and the fighters to the north were "under one command structure."

Mr. Saleh is now styling himself the "caretaker president" of Afghanistan. He refused to elaborate on the connections he claimed to have to Friday's uprising, saying only that "the resistance will grow."

He added, "Afghanistan is alive and hasn't become a Talibanistan."

Guarded by a deep gorge, the Panjshir Valley holds a singular place in Afghan history. Under the leadership of the famed mujahedeen commander Ahmed Shah Massoud, it held out against the Soviets in the 1980s and the Taliban in the 1990s and was then used by American spies and special forces operators to launch the American invasion that would drive the militants from power.

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But Mr. Massoud was killed by assassins from Al Qaeda two days before the Sept. 11 attacks and Afghanistan, the Taliban and the world have changed dramatically in the intervening decades.

The militants are battle-hardened and far better armed after capturing huge arsenals of American-made weapons as they swept across the country this summer. The Panjshiris, in contrast, have given up most of their weapons, and lack a single, unifying leader like Mr. Massoud, though his son is involved in the current resistance effort.

Most important, there appears to be little international will to back them or any armed resistance to the Taliban, for that matter.



Afghan security forces move in a convoy through an area of the Panjshir province on Thursday. Ahmad Sahel Arman/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The United States and its allies are focused on evacuating people from Kabul. They are actively seeking cooperation from the Taliban to do so, and so far the militants have proven somewhat cooperative, eager to show the world that they are no longer the same brutal zealots who ruled Afghanistan two decades ago.

Armed uprisings could quickly change that calculus, prompting the Taliban to violently clamp down at the very moment when the United States and European countries are struggling to keep the evacuation moving.

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.

American military and intelligence officials said on Saturday they were closely monitoring reports that Afghan resistance fighters had pushed the Taliban out of the three northern districts, but there had been no requests from those groups for American airstrikes or other assistance, and none offered, at least publicly.

Military officials said they would entertain any such requests very warily at this point, fearing that any battlefield strikes against the Taliban could jeopardize the fragile agreement that has been reached with senior Taliban officials in recent days to allow Americans safe passage to the airport in Kabul.

The Pentagon has said there are no military or security forces from the Afghan regime still operating as functioning units in the fight against the Taliban.

Leaders in Panjshir seem to know that any fighting is likely to be seen by the United States as a distraction that could endanger an evacuation effort that has already proven disastrously chaotic. Many are furious at what they consider a betrayal, and not hesitant to say so.

“A super power signed an agreement with a terrorist group. What you see in Kabul is a massive humiliation for Western civilization,” Mr. Saleh wrote in a text message earlier this week.

On Saturday, he was even more blunt: “NATO and the U.S. failed,” Mr. Saleh wrote.

Still, another of the movement’s leaders, Ahmad Massoud, son of the late Panjshiri leader, sought to drum up American support in an op-ed published Wednesday in The Washington Post, writing that he was ready to “follow in his father’s footsteps” but needed weapons and supplies to succeed.

Without them, he acknowledged that his forces could not hold long should the Taliban decide to fight their way into Panjshir.

The mere fact Mr. Massoud had to make his appeal in public and not in private meetings with American military or intelligence officials was an indication of how little enthusiasm there is for his movement in Washington.

Eric Schmitt contributed reporting.