

## Selling Fruit Where the Taliban Stalk the Streets

For weeks, the northern city of Kunduz has suffered daily street battles. Times journalists were there to document a cat-and-mouse war for control.

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KUNDUZ, Afghanistan — The Afghan way of war in 2021 comes down to this: a watermelon vendor on a sweltering city street, a government Humvee at the front line just 30 feet away, and Taliban fighters lurking unseen on the other side of the road.

When the shooting starts, the vendor makes himself scarce, leaving his melons on the table and hoping for the best. When it stops, selling resumes, to customers now all too rare.

"I don't have a choice. I've got to sell the melons," said the vendor, Abdel Alim, speaking to New York Times journalists while he kept an eye on a lane within Kunduz city from which he said Taliban had emerged. "Most people have left," he said. "There is fighting all the time."



Abdel Alim, right, runs a melon stand in Kunduz. On Monday, three young residents were killed near his stand by crossfire between the Taliban and Afghan forces. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

The Taliban are pressing in on all sides of Kunduz, a provincial capital of roughly 374,000 in Afghanistan's north, and several other provincial capitals as well, as the Afghan government's war with the Taliban enters a new and dangerous phase. For weeks, the insurgents have captured vulnerable districts across the country's north, sometimes without even firing a shot. And on Wednesday, the Taliban said they had captured an important border crossing with Pakistan, at Spin Boldak — the fourth crossing they have seized in less than a month.

It is all part of a broader strategy to tighten the noose around the Afghan capital, Kabul. The insurgents are sewing up the Afghan countryside, cutting off the road network, and squeezing the increasingly enfeebled central government.

In late June, the Taliban entered Kunduz city, testing their limits against soldiers and police — the ones who haven't given up — in the provincial capital's streets. The Times journalists went there last week to assess the heavy toll the fighting is taking on a crucial city.

Civilians in the crossfire are paying the price. Dozens have been killed and injured; up to 70 a day are brought to the hospital, said Mohammed Naim Mangal, the director of Kunduz Regional Hospital. Just on Monday night, two young residents were killed in the cross fire near Mr. Alim's watermelon stand.

The jagged front line of combat is often just a block or two away from wherever you happen to be, down quiet streets lined with dusty sycamore trees and low mud brick dwellings baking in the heat. The Taliban are inside the city and outside of it, keeping bedraggled soldiers and police awake all night. The sound of their mortar fire mingles with the call to prayer as the sun goes down.



Sgt. Abdul Malik, left, and other Afghan commandos by their armored personnel carrier in Kunduz. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

As of mid-July, the Taliban are inside four out of this city's nine municipal districts, battling for control with the government forces.

Much of the fighting happens at night when the fierce heat diminishes. During the day, the city center bustles with vendors, but there are few shoppers. There is risk here for seller and buyer. Closest to the front lines, the shops are shuttered, metal canopies drawn tightly down, glass windows blasted out.

"It's permanent war," said Mustafa Turkmen, a carpet seller. "No one can come here, and no one can leave. Every night when I wake up, I hear gunfire." He comes to his shop nonetheless.

Barely holding the line inside the city are the government's special forces, better trained and tougher than the regular troops. These commandos have taken over an abandoned cotton oil factory, once the symbol of this region's stillborn prosperity. Their commander, Lt. Col. Masoud Nijrabi, expressed scorn for the regular forces who fail to hold the territory he and his men are forced

to claw back from the encroaching Taliban each day.



Lt. Col. Masoud Nijrabi, second from right, with his commandos at the cotton factory that is now their base in Kunduz. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

"It's not our job to keep these areas," he said, fingering prayer beads. "The Taliban are coming closer. They are forcing people to leave their homes." His men looked tired. Too much fighting.

Inside his office last week, the provincial governor wept. "The pressure is tremendous," said Gov. Najibullah Omarkhil, dabbing his eyes with a tissue. "There is no doubt, everyone's life is in danger," he said. "It's a big weight on my shoulders. And it could get worse."



Gov. Najibullah Omarkhil in his office in Kunduz. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

The nearby front is an abandoned gas station where two RPG-pocked government Humvees are parked. The ragged soldiers there are fully caught up in the nocturnal war. “We don’t sleep at night,” said Sgt. Abdul Malik, 31. “There’s fighting every day.” As he spoke, his comrade stalked around the station in a T-shirt, carrying a U.S.-made M4 carbine.

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“When it starts, it’s hell,” said Hamidullah Hamidi, a grocery store owner down the street. He shuts down at 4 p.m., but can’t always avoid the fighting.



Hamidullah Hamidi in his shop near a front line in Kunduz. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

The districts surrounding Kunduz have all been captured by the Taliban; the roads leading out of town are under their control. For the moment, though, the local airport is still functioning, though not for commercial traffic. A government helicopter was damaged there during fighting on Sunday night.

More than 35,000 residents in and around Kunduz have been forced out of their homes, according to the United Nations. Many of the displaced are living miserably, outside, exposed to the extreme heat — 115 degrees during the day — hungry, with no privacy, the only shelter ragged sheets strung up on wooden poles.

“Every day, there are mortars. We had no choice,” said Ali Mohammad, 57, a village elder from the suburb of Charkhab, camping out with hundreds of others — women, children and the elderly — on the grounds of the Bibi Amina school, one of six schools allocated for those forced to flee.

“Last night I was hungry. No one is helping us,” Mr. Mohammad said.

Four children, ages 1 to 9, clutched at the burqa of their mother, Zakira Akbar. “An animal couldn’t even live here,” said Ms. Akbar, 30. “The government should help us as soon as possible.”



Families displaced by recent fighting took refuge at the Bibi Amina school. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

With the capture of mostly undefended rural districts sewn up, the Taliban have begun to push boldly in, firing from abandoned houses at the edges into the municipal police stations or lightly manned military positions within the cities. The residents of these now-empty houses have either fled or been pushed out by the Taliban.

#### 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.

Elsewhere in the country, several other provincial capitals are under siege. Last week, the Taliban forced their way past the perimeter of Afghanistan's second-largest city, Kandahar, in the south. Tuesday fighting continued in four of the city's police districts. Dozens of wounded civilians in Kandahar have been brought to the hospitals. Thousands have fled.

In neighboring Helmand Province, the capital, Lashkar Gah, is on the verge of collapse, say members of the provincial council. At least three other cities are under attack or surrounded.

Kunduz has a recent history of conflict with the Taliban. It was briefly taken by the insurgents in 2015 and then again in 2016. Both times, the insurgents were eventually pushed back by the Afghan forces with help from American airstrikes. It was here that an American gunship mistakenly blasted a Doctors Without Borders hospital in 2015, killing 42 people.



An Afghan security forces outpost on the edge of Kunduz. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

This time, the Americans won't be coming. The battle for Kunduz has become an intimate fight between Afghan opponents at close range.

"Every night they come to these houses and fire on us," said the chief of police of Kunduz's Third Municipal District, Sayed Mansoor Hashimi, looking out at now-vacant dwellings all around his police station. "Slowly, slowly they are tightening the circle."

The war in Kunduz is intertwined with the fabric of the city. Shopping trips are planned between bursts of war. Residents no longer pay sufficient attention, said Marzia Salam Yaftali, the medical director at Kunduz Regional Hospital. "They are wounded in the streets or in the bazaar," she said.

At the hospital, Ezzatullah, 14, lay in one of the wards, his legs wrapped in bandages: He lost both his feet when a mortar landed as he was playing outside his house. Three members of his family, including one of his parents, were killed.



Ezzatullah, 14, right, and his brother at the Kunduz Regional Hospital. He lost both his feet to a mortar shell. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

"I can't go to school now," he said. Asked what he saw as his future, he replied firmly: "I want to be a man, to rebuild my country."

The war, and the enemy, are inescapable. "We have to live here. Where can we go?" asked Ezamuddin Safi, a telecommunications worker who had to flee his home inside the city in early July. He was passing the day inside a small downtown restaurant.

"My 3-year-old boy, he screams when he hears the firing. He's tired," said Mr. Safi, 25. "Taliban are everywhere."