
AFGHANISTAN: TALIBAN EDGE CLOSER TO HELMAND CAPITAL AS US STEPS UP AIR STRIKES

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12.08.2016

AFP; August 11, 2016

Fighting is raging in Helmand as Afghan troops try to beat back Taliban insurgents advancing on the besieged capital of the southern poppy-growing province.

Afghan forces fought back insurgents after they stormed Nawa district, just south of Lashkar Gah city, late on Wednesday, raising alarm that the provincial capital was at risk.

But United States and Afghan officials insisted they would not allow another urban centre to be captured, after the Taliban briefly overran northern Kunduz city last September in their biggest victory in 15 years of war.

"The security situation in Lashkar Gah is under our control," defence ministry spokesman Dawlat Waziri said after special forces were deployed.

"We have retaken control of Nawa. Fighting is still going on in the outskirts but we are making progress with clearance operations," he said, adding that dozens of Taliban were killed in the fight.

Fierce battles in recent days across Helmand, seen as the focal point of the insurgency, have sent thousands of people fleeing to Lashkar Gah, sparking a humanitarian crisis as officials report food and water shortages.

The United States has stepped up air strikes supporting Afghan forces on the ground, highlighting the intensity of the battle in Helmand.

The Taliban effectively control or contest 10 of the 14 districts in Helmand, the deadliest province for British and US forces in Afghanistan over the past decade.

The turmoil convulsing the long-contested province, which has a huge opium harvest that helps fund the insurgency, underscores a rapidly unravelling security situation in Afghanistan.

'We Will Die Of Hunger': Thousands Of Civilians Flee

Around 30,000 people have been displaced in Helmand in recent weeks, local officials said, with many of those fleeing to Lashkar Gah forced to abandon their lentil, maize and cotton crops during

the lucrative harvest season.

"We left everything behind in Nawa — our house, our grape and maize harvests," Mohammad Ali, 40, said in a camp in the provincial capital.

"We fled with 15 members of my family to Lashkar Gah, fearing for our lives.

"For the last three days we have been surviving on bread and water. We will die of hunger."

The residents of Lashkar Gah said the city was practically besieged, with roads from neighbouring districts heavily mined by the insurgents.

NATO officially ended its combat mission in December 2014, but US forces were granted greater powers in June to strike at the insurgents as President Barack Obama vowed a more aggressive campaign.

"The situation in Helmand remains contested," NATO said in a statement.

"While there is clearly an increase in fighting, the Taliban have suffered a number of casualties and [Afghan forces] have been able to recover many checkpoints."

Northern Kunduz was the first city to fall to the insurgents last September, in a stinging blow to Afghan forces who have struggled to rein in the Taliban since the NATO combat mission ended.

The fighting in Helmand comes as Afghan troops are stretched on multiple fronts across Afghanistan — including eastern Nangarhar province where the Islamic State group is making inroads.

Kaynak/Source: