
AFGHANISTAN: TALIBAN CAPTURES GHORMACH DISTRICT

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Taliban fighters captured the district of Ghormach in Afghanistan's northwestern Faryab province on Tuesday after heavy fighting with security forces.

Provincial council members confirmed to Al Jazeera that the armed group wrested control of the district after Afghan forces retreated, adding that several soldiers had been killed and weapons seized.

"The provincial government spokesman said that early this morning a large number of Taliban attacked the city centre and captured the city * He said the Taliban were taking position in residential areas and that Afghan forces had to pull out from the centre of the city to avoid any civilian casualties," Al Jazeera's Qais Azimy said, reporting from Kabul.

"Ghormach is a very significant district because it borders Turkmenistan and is very important to control the border with the Central Asian country. We expect ongoing fighting over the coming days."

The Taliban have waged an insurgency against the Western-backed Kabul government since being toppled from power by a US-led invasion in 2001. It has intensified attacks across the country in recent months, pressuring Afghan forces on multiple fronts.

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In the Tirankot district of Uruzgan province on Tuesday at least 100 Afghan policemen surrendered to the fighters.

"They were surrounded by the Taliban for at least a month and were not getting enough support from the central government, provincial MPs said, and that's why they went to the Taliban with their equipment," said Azimy.

"We are also getting reports from west Afghanistan in the Farah province that hundreds of Taliban had gathered to attack the centre of the province in Farah city and that Afghan forces were having difficulty fighting them."

At least 96 Afghan soldiers have been killed in the past week in battles with the Taliban, according to the Afghan defence ministry.

'Clearance operation'

Meanwhile, hundreds of Afghan commandos backed by NATO air power were deployed on Tuesday to drive Taliban fighters from the southern city of Lashkar Gah after 14 people were killed in a coordinated attack.

Monday's assault marked the Taliban's latest attempt to seize the capital of Helmand province, underscoring unravelling security as they expand their foothold across the opium-rich province.

"More than 300 commandos * have been deployed to the city to prevent Taliban advancement," said Abdul Jabar Qahraman, government special envoy for security in Helmand.

Provincial spokesman Omar Zwak told AFP news agency the commandos were sent from Kabul and neighbouring provinces to launch a "clearance operation" in Lashkar Gah after the attack, which killed 10 policemen and four others.

"Soon the security forces will clear the whole city from Taliban," Zwak said.

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About 30,000 people have been displaced in Helmand in recent weeks and most have fled to Lashkar Gah. But the city is practically besieged, with roads from neighbouring districts heavily

mined by the fighters.

The intervention in Helmand has fuelled the perception that foreign powers are increasingly being drawn back into the conflict as Afghan forces struggle to rein in the Taliban.

Monday's early-morning assault also underlined the Taliban's sustained push into urban centres, coming a week after they briefly stormed into Kunduz in the north before being repelled by Afghan forces.

On Saturday General John Nicholson, the NATO military commander in Afghanistan, flew with the Afghan defence minister to Lashkar Gah to assure provincial elders that the city would not fall.

The Taliban effectively controls or contests 10 of the 14 districts in Helmand, the deadliest province for British and US troops over the past decade and blighted by a huge opium harvest that helps to fund the insurgency.

In August, Washington deployed some 100 troops to Lashkar Gah, the first major US deployment to the city since foreign forces withdrew in 2014.

In recent months, fighters have attempted to overrun other provincial capitals, from Kunduz and Baghlan in the north to Farah in the west, but Afghan forces have managed to repel the attacks.

Kaynak/Source: