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## Taliban Attack Kills 16 Afghan Police Personnel

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The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan has staged a major overnight battlefield assault in a southern province, killing at least 16 police personnel and capturing two outposts.

A local security official told VOA on Friday the fighting erupted in the district of Maiwand in Kandahar, saying Afghan forces also inflicted heavy casualties on the Taliban in ensuing clashes.

He said the assailants also seized three U.S.-made military vehicles, commonly known as Humvees. The official requested anonymity.

A provincial police spokesman, Zia Durrani, told VOA 27 Taliban fighters, including four key commanders, were killed.

A provincial government spokesman, Samim Khpolwak, confirmed the fighting but declined to discuss further details.

Kandahar is known as the birthplace of the Taliban. It was the de-facto capital of Afghanistan when the insurgent group was ruling most of the country before its ouster from power in late 2001 by a U.S.-led military coalition.

Most of the districts in neighboring Helmand, the largest of all the 34 Afghan provinces, are under the control of the Taliban and fighting also is underway in the nearby Uruzgan province.

Afghan security forces suffered unprecedented casualties in the 2016 fighting season and U.S. military commanders anticipate more insurgent violence this year.

“The insidious combination of corruption and poor leadership is the root cause of this problem,” said John Sopko, the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, or SIGAR.

He made the remarks last week while announcing his list of key security challenges facing the new U.S. administration as it inherits America’s second-longest war after Vietnam.

### **No winter lull**

Since the withdrawal of U.S.-led international forces more than two years ago, there has been no lull in the Afghan fighting. Harsh winter and heavy snowfall in previous years would force Taliban fighters to retreat to their traditional sanctuaries in neighboring Pakistan to rest and regroup before returning to the battlefield for the summer fighting.

“The spring offensive/winter lull is an outdated concept now, the main reason being that the Taliban hold large swaths of territory year-round and so the fighting continues,” said Ted Callahan, a Western security expert based in northeastern Afghanistan.

The Taliban have captured about 10 percent of Afghan territory since with the withdrawal of most international forces two years ago, the Afghan government controls two-thirds of the population while the rest is strongly contested, according to latest U.S. military assessments.

The territorial control offers the insurgents more of a revenue base they can use to sustain themselves through the winter, mainly in terms of food and shelter, but also in terms of munitions captured from Afghan forces, Callahan told VOA.

“They [the Taliban] can easily keep their momentum going throughout the winter, and so you no longer see Taliban commanders go back to Pakistan for the winter, as they often did in the past, and then they’d come back in the spring to kick off the spring offensive,” he observed.

### **‘Compromised system’**

In his detailed report that Sopko released last week, he cited leadership and corruption as among the biggest challenges facing the Afghan National Defense and Security Force, or ANDSF.

“Afghan commanders often pocket the paychecks of ghost soldiers for whom the U.S. is paying the salary. The number of ghost soldiers is not insignificant, it likely reaches into the tens of thousands of soldiers and police,” he noted.

Citing “credible information,” Sopko said some Afghan commanders are not going on patrols or are not coming to the assistance of other units when they are in trouble because they want to preserve fuel that they later sell in open markets.

“Multiple credible sources have told SIGAR staff in Afghanistan that a significant portion, perhaps as much as 50 percent, of U.S.-purchased fuel is siphoned off at various stages of this compromised system,” he said.

In his report, Sopko agreed with the U.S. military assessment that the Afghan government controls roughly 64 percent of the country's territory.

Afghan Defense Ministry officials strongly disputed most of SIGAR's findings, however, saying the government, with the help of foreign partners, has made progress in addressing corruption and issues related to ANDSF leadership.

They insist that ANDSF's improved capacity and sacrifices prevented the Taliban from capturing any major population center in Afghanistan in 2016, and they assert they now are better prepared to battle the insurgency this year.