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## Afghanistan: Mission Unaccomplished

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The Afghan government has sent army reinforcements to Sangin to fight Taliban militants, who in the last two days have become close to taking control of the strategically important town.

There are conflicting claims as to who is getting the upper hand. Helmand's governor, Mirza Khan Rahimi, insisted the authorities were still in control but his own deputy, Mohammad Jan Rasulyar, said Sangin had been overrun by the Taliban late on Dec. 20. «*The Taliban have captured the police headquarters, the governor's office as well as the intelligence agency building in Sangin*», he told AFP.

Mr Rasoulyar used a Facebook post to appeal to the president for direct intervention in the province. «*Be quick and act on this! Protect Helmand from this life and death situation and distance yourself from the circle of those lawyers who tell you everything is OK and the situation is normal*», he wrote.

Afghan President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani and key ministers left for Baku on December 21 as the Taliban forces were advancing.

The fact that a senior Afghan official is addressing the president on Facebook reflects significant

internal divisions within the administration, says the BBC's World Service South Asia Editor Ethirajan Anbarasan.

The Taliban insist that their siege of the town is not over *«and the government forces will soon announce their defeat»*.

Afghan forces holding out against a Taliban assault on the district of Sangin were reportedly running out of weapons and supplies, and there have been no reinforcements for a long time despite the pleas – the fact that testifies to inefficiency of national security forces.

The resurgence of rebel activity in Sangin district poses a major security threat to the struggling Afghan government, a year after the withdrawal of the bulk of US and allied combat forces.

The loss of the town would be a serious setback for the government in a province. Sangin is a key district that links Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province, with the province's northern districts. Regaining full control of it would increase the Taliban's mobility in parts of northern Helmand and cut a key supply line for Afghan forces with Lashkar Gah. Sangin is also a rich opium production centre with important supply routes for the opium trade to be used for funding the Taliban's war effort. Security analysts say Taliban forces are determined to regain control of Helmand, a region to which many Taliban leaders have close ties, and where they enjoy considerable popular support.

The proximity to Pakistan also serves to give the area a broader strategic significance.

The UK ordered a deployment of military advisers to Helmand to support the besieged Afghan troops in the town. More than 100 British troops were killed in the fight to hold the district before responsibility for the area was handed over to the Americans in 2010. The UK ended combat operations in Afghanistan last year, but around 450 troops remain in mentoring and support roles, defence officials say. Some 12,000 foreign soldiers are deployed as part of the NATO-led Resolute Support international coalition, which is meant to underpin Afghanistan's own security forces.

Analysts say the allied effort to support the Afghan government is facing a new threat, with elements linked to Islamic State (IS) fighters in Syria and Iraq establishing its presence in the region.

In addition to the conflict in Sangin, heavy fighting has continued in the districts of Khan Neshin, falling back and forth between insurgent and government forces in recent weeks, as well as in Marja, Gereshk and Washir. For weeks now, members of the Taliban have also been holed up in Babaji, a Lashkar Gah suburb. The head of Helmand's provincial council, Muhammad Kareem Atal, was quoted by AP as saying that around 65% of Helmand was now under Taliban control.

In September, Taliban forces took control of the northern town of Kunduz, though Afghan forces eventually regained it with the support of US Special Forces.

The losses in Helmand underscore the limitations of the Afghan security forces widely believed to be badly stretched trying to hold back the Taliban advance on multiple fronts. Afghans fleeing their country make up a significant component of the wave of migrants that have sought refuge in Europe this year.

The overall security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated in the second half of 2015 with an increase in insurgent attacks and higher casualties among both Taliban and national forces, a Pentagon report stated on December 15.

*«The Taliban have remained active in their traditional strongholds, namely in Helmand in the south and Logar and Wardak in the east, and also created a sense of instability for brief periods of time in other parts of the country, such as in Kunduz in northern Afghanistan»,* the Pentagon's semi-annual report to Congress says.

Already, US President Barack Obama has backtracked on a pledge to pull out all but 1,000 troops and in October announced that 9,800 US forces would remain in Afghanistan until the end of 2016.

The situation in Afghanistan is a cause for concern for Russia. Russian security analysts realize that there are various Islamist organizations operating in the country besides the Taliban, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. They are Sunnis but of different ethnic backgrounds: Arabs, Chechens, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Pashtuns, etc. If there is an insurgency somewhere in Tajikistan, the rebels can rely on arms supplies from Afghanistan. Some of these weapons may be transferred by local Tajiks and Uzbeks to underground organizations inside Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

On October 28, Director of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Alexander Bortnikov spoke to the heads of security services of the CIS member states in Moscow.

According to him, huge numbers of Islamist fighters were accumulating on Afghanistan's northern border ready to march into neighbouring states. Fighters from the Taliban, many of whom have pledged allegiance to IS, were heavily armed and prepared to pass through porous border controls. He said the escalation in Afghanistan was fraught with terrible consequences. Numerous criminal groups were concentrated near the northern borders of the country ready to invade Central Asia. Some of them have also begun operating under the Islamic State flag, the official warned.

The jihadi hate group could be trying to open up a new front to the north of its territories after being pegged back in Syria by Russian airstrikes.

Afghan opium is being processed into high-grade heroin in clandestine Turkish drug labs for distribution in Europe and Russia, Victor Ivanov, the Director of the Russian Federal Service for Drug Control (FKSN), has revealed. The trafficking route was exposed after a joint Russian-Afghan anti-drug operation.

The head of Russia's federal anti-drug agency said that a 600 kg opium shipment was seized in a joint operation carried out by Russian and Afghan special anti-drug units in the city of Doshi in

Afghanistan's Baglan Province. The drug shipment was found in a truck going to Turkey via Iran.

Ivanov stressed that drug trafficking has enabled IS to increase its strength four-fold since 2014.

*The Islamic State is «actively engaged with drug trafficking», Ivanov said, adding that according to the FSKN estimates, the group's income from illegal drug trade «makes up to \$200-500 million annually».*

Russia is ready to help Afghanistan.

A contract for the delivery of Russian Mi-35 attack helicopters was signed in October to support the fight against IS insurgents.

The Afghan Air Force currently owns five heavily armored older Mi-35 gunships supplied by the Czech Republic in 2008 but they are rarely operational.

The Mi-35 is a close-air support aircraft and can be deployed against ground troops including armored targets, unmanned aerial vehicles, and other helicopters.

Russia will also provide military training for Afghan officers.

*«Afghanistan has an army and many Afghans are capable of bearing arms and know how to use them well. We need to strengthen the national potential, and not try to defend the Afghan government with foreign troops»,* said Zamir Kabulov, the head of the Russian Foreign Ministry's Second Asia Department, criticizing US and NATO military presence in the country.

The US-led operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have ended up in failure to produce great headaches for the world community. The United States won wars but lost peace unable to convert the invaded countries into viable states. There are consequences to face.

The resurgence of the Taliban adds uncertainty to the fate of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and to the preservation of a secular regime in Kabul. The international jihadist forces now assembling in Afghanistan are a destabilizing factor for the entire region. This sounds an alarm bell for Russia and its allies in Central Asia, which sooner or later will force them to undertake pre-emptive action.

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A military operation against IS in Libya is on the agenda.

The situation in Iraq is uncertain as Turkey's troops have entered the country without a permission of Iraqi government, which has so far failed to free Mosul, a large city, from the militants of Islamic State. International community has a long way to go till it sees light at the end of the tunnel as fighting that involves a great number of actors continues in Syria. Huge swathes of the globe are hit by turmoil and conflicts as we enter 2016. Joint international efforts

with the participation of UN Security Council's permanent members seem to be the only way to meet the challenge.