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## Afghan officials raise alarm as Taliban gain in Helmand province

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The Taliban are tightening their noose around the capital of disputed Helmand province in southern Afghanistan which has seen sustained fighting, residents and local officials say.

Security officials and local leaders offered differing assessments of the risk of the city of Lashkar Gah falling, with military commanders asserting that the situation has stabilized.

But officials in the besieged city are increasingly pessimistic.

"If we don't receive support from the central government, the province will collapse soon," said provincial council chief Karim Atal.

The Taliban are seeking to make Lashkar Gah the second provincial capital they have captured since their extremist Islamic rule was toppled in a U.S.-led campaign in 2001. The insurgents briefly held the northern city of Kunduz last October before being driven out by U.S.-backed Afghan troops.

Atal said Afghan security forces in the province, which have undergone major reorganization this year, are capable but he said there was a lack of attention from leaders in Kabul.

As part of its national strategic plan, much of the Afghan government's focus in the past month has been on a campaign against Islamic State militants in eastern Afghanistan.

"If the government does not support Helmand, we will call on our people to grab weapons and fight against the Taliban," Atal said.

Lashkar Gah continues to be flooded with civilians fleeing the fighting that has nearly surrounded the city. The Taliban have seized some areas only a few km from the city center, said Omar Zwak, spokesman for the provincial governor.

A major highway between Lashkar Gah and Kandahar has been closed on and off for days by Taliban checkpoints and roadside bombs, he said.

Many in the city point to U.S. air strikes as a decisive factor in preventing the Taliban from overrunning the whole province. In the past two weeks U.S. warplanes have conducted around 25 air strikes in the province, while hundreds of coalition advisers try to bolster Afghan troops.

Fighting has consumed much of Nawa-i-Barakzayi district immediately to the south of Lashkar Gah, district police chief Ahmad Shah Salem said.

"Contact has been lost with police in some places," he said. "The Taliban have conquered some of our checkpoints. So far we haven't received reinforcements, as well as food and ammunition. If we do not receive reinforcement soon, the district will collapse."

Officials from the Defense and Interior Ministry visited Lashkar Gah on Tuesday. Provincial police chief Brigadier General Aqa Noor Kentoz said reinforcements were scheduled to arrive soon.

The commander of the army's 215 Corps, General Maiwand Faqir, said counter-offensives against the Taliban have been complicated by hundreds of roadside bombs and the presence of civilians, but he said his troops had everything they needed.