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Taliban fighters moving back into former Afghanistan stronghold

By David S. Cloud and Laura King

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Reporting from Sangin and Kabul, Afghanistan

Insurgents who were driven out of the Taliban stronghold of Sangin in southern Afghanistan are flowing back in as winter lifts, threatening fragile gains achieved by U.S. Marines over the last five months, according to American commanders.

The return of midlevel Taliban leaders, including some believed to have taken refuge in Pakistan, raises concern that violence is likely to surge in this strategically located district in northeastern Helmand province, long used by the Taliban as a base of operations.

"We're starting to see them come back because the Taliban leadership is furious that it lost so much ground and they are actively trying to reassert their control," said Lt. Col. Jason Morris, commander of the Marine battalion in the area, the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment.

Sangin is shaping up as a key test of whether the security gains seen in Helmand and neighboring Kandahar province since the influx of tens of thousands of additional U.S. troops will prove lasting, or whether the Taliban will reclaim some of the areas held by U.S. and Afghan forces in the two provinces.

The importance that the United States attaches to Sangin was on display Tuesday, when Defense

Secretary Robert M. Gates visited the Marine base there for a briefing from Morris and to meet with troops.

"The gains are fragile and reversible," Gates later told reporters, referring to Sangin and other areas of the south where security has improved in recent months. "If we can sustain the gains we've made and expand them further, I think it'll be a powerful message."

More fighting is expected in Sangin, where 29 Marines have been killed and 175 wounded since October, the highest casualty rates for a five-month period of any battalion during the 10-year Afghan conflict.

"Your success obviously has come at an extraordinary price," Gates told a group of Marines at Forward Operating Base Jackson. "Our nation owes you an incredible debt."

Even as Gates was recognizing the toll on the military, Afghan President Hamid Karzai seemed to raise questions about how much faith he puts in the U.S.-led strategy for quelling the insurgency.

In a speech in Kabul, he renewed a call for the phasing out of so-called provincial reconstruction teams: civilian-military groups that focus on development projects. He also suggested, as he has previously, that there was no long-term military solution to the Afghan conflict.

"We are grateful to the international community," he said. "But they haven't brought us peace."

Such outbursts are common for Karzai and are almost always ignored by U.S. officials, who seem to have decided that there is little they can do to alter Karzai's penchant for criticizing his allies.

Along with an influx of insurgents, a peace deal between U.S. forces with the area's largest tribe, the Alikozai, is showing signs of fraying, deepening concern that attacks will intensify, especially in the Upper Sangin Valley.

The tribe's elders promised two months ago to stop attacks on coalition forces in return for aid to build schools, clinics and other projects.

But attacks against Marines have continued, Morris has said.

Lt. Gen. David Rodriguez, deputy commander in Afghanistan, told reporters Tuesday that, having been driven out of Sangin and other strongholds in Helmand, Taliban leaders are less able to attack U.S. forces with hidden bombs. Taliban fighters are expected to intensify a campaign of assassination and intimidation against Afghans who cooperate with the Americans, he said.

"This is no longer their home field," he said, referring to Sangin. "They don't own it the way they used to, and they're going to change the way they come after us."