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Taliban fight back in Afghan town with campaign of fear, intimidation

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A month after losing control of their southern base in Marjah, the Taliban have begun to fight back, launching a campaign of assassination and intimidation to frighten people from supporting the U.S. and its Afghan allies.

At least one alleged government sympathizer has been beheaded. There are rumors that others have been killed. Afghans in the town that U.S., Afghan and NATO troops captured in a three-week assault that began Feb. 13 awake to letters posted on their doors warning against helping the troops.

Winning public support in this former Taliban stronghold in Helmand province 360 miles southwest of Kabul is considered essential to preventing insurgents from returning.

The Marjah operation will serve as a model for campaigns elsewhere, including one expected by summer to secure villages around Kandahar, the Taliban's spiritual birthplace and the largest city in the south.

Military commanders believe the Taliban campaign is achieving some success because of questions raised at town meetings: Do the U.S. forces want to shut down the mosques and ban prayer? Will they will use lookout posts on their bases to ogle women? Are they going to take farmers' land away?

"Dislocating the insurgents physically was easy. Dislocating them socially — proving that we're here to stay and to help — is a lot harder," said Lt. Col. Jeff Rule, the head of operations for Marines in Helmand.

There are no firm figures on how many Taliban are left in Marjah. Marine and Afghan military officials say they believe most of those still here are from the area and the foreign fighters have fled.

Regardless of Taliban numbers, their influence is still felt.

New cell phone towers brought phone service to Marjah a little over a week ago. But the service doesn't work at night because the Taliban threaten or bribe tower operators to shut off the network, presumably to prevent people from alerting troops and police as they plant bombs after dark.

Some of the workers on canal-clearing projects have been threatened or have been beaten up by insurgents.

At least one canal worker who received threats returned and said he will keep working despite the risk, said Maj. David Fennell, who oversees about 15 civil affairs troops working to win over the population.

"That's when you know that you fought the Taliban and you won," Fennell said. "I tell my team time and time again: 'What did we just do today? We hit the Taliban in the mouth.'"

This is the struggle for Marjah now: winning people over with a job or a vaccination for a child. The victories are small because the Taliban already proved it can make good on its promises by enforcing harsh justice while in power.

"My sense is that the Taliban will reinfiltate in due course as the Afghan government fails to live up to the modest expectations NATO has of it," says Mervyn Patterson, a former U.N. political affairs expert in Afghanistan. "I do not think that the Taliban have been weakened in Helmand by the loss of Marjah. They have been having ups and downs, and this was a modest down, but not something that is significant, in and of itself. I expect they will gradually return to Marjah."

Many of the estimated 80,000 people here share the same fears, even though there are about 4,000 NATO and Afghan troops in and around Marjah, including two Marine battalions in the town. Some say they're afraid to take money from the military because if the Taliban find them with the cash, they'll be punished.

"I can't take any money because I'm afraid for my life," said Borjan, a rough-skinned farmer who owns a house that has been taken over by a Marine platoon until they can build their own outpost. He seems to want compensation: he lists equipment and field supplies that have been damaged but refuses to discuss how much it is worth. He just wants them out of the house, which is occupied by a son.

Lt. Shawn Miller said he believes Borjan really is scared. But the elders who accompanied Borjan to help him lodge his complaint are more indifferent. They just want to be left alone to farm. The Taliban mostly left them alone.

The Marines are trying to win partly through diplomacy and partly through getting development and infrastructure projects running as quickly as possible to show that the Afghan government is serious this time.

U.S. troops are having success with offering to improve mosques — repairing structures or installing loudspeakers to try to win over influential mullahs while creating an unattractive target for Taliban militants who won't want to attack mosques.

This may overestimate the restraint of the Taliban. The beheaded man was a mosque leader, said Capt. Iqbal Khan of the Afghan army, whose 91 soldiers are embedded with a Marine company in central Marjah.

Even so, projects of all types push ahead. Three medical clinics are open, staffed by doctors from Kabul and locals who ran private clinics under the Taliban, Fennell said. Two interim schools have started, staffed by locals and with more than 100 students.

The canal-cleaning project has grown from 40 workers to about 800, Fennell said. But it took weeks of cajoling — taking first the teenagers who showed up, then eventually recruiting a few men of military age, then turning the older men into contractors in charge of getting fighting-age men to clean whole sections of the canal.

Marjah's administrative chief, Abdul Zahir, said he and his advisers have decided that they need to show they have the upper hand in town by the end of the month.

"We have about two weeks to prove ourselves," Zahir told The Associated Press in an interview at his temporary headquarters — a concrete structure in a dirt compound outfitted by the U.S. with a few tents for holding meetings and sleeping cots.

But he acknowledged that the task is difficult. Homemade bombs still appear every night on roads traveled by the military. Gunfire can be heard many evenings in the center of town. Earlier this week, a Marine foot patrol hit a bomb planted near the district center, seriously wounding several of them.

"We have to prove there is security so that people take part in projects," Zahir said. While the Afghan government and its NATO allies have far greater force, the Taliban are locals and a proven threat.

"They are part of the community down here, so it is very easy for them to influence people," Zahir said.

The Marines refuse to give precise time frames, saying they'll be here as long as they're needed. But commanders and Afghan officials also acknowledge that they only have a short time to win over the population.

"If this takes six to seven months, that gives a big enough window to the Taliban," said Lt. Col. Calvert Worth Jr., commander of the 1st Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment operating in central Marjah.

He spoke as he toured a dusty market where merchants sought money for battle damage. Some demands are minor: broken locks on shops. Some are exaggerated: a man wanted \$100,000 for oil stolen either by the Taliban or the allies in the offensive.

Three days a week, residents line up to lodge complaints or requests with Zahir. One middle-aged man said he was there to collect restitution for his 10-year-old brother who was injured in the fighting. He carried a paper from medics who treated his brother as proof.

Gul Sahed said his neighborhood is still not safe. There is fighting nearly every day and the Taliban say they'll be beaten if they leave their homes at night. He considered not coming to the district center because the Taliban might see him. But he decided that he needed the money, and took the risk.