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Taliban takes hold in once-peaceful northern Afghanistan

By Joshua Partlow

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QAYSAR, AFGHANISTAN -- In squads of roaring dirt bikes and armed to the teeth, Taliban fighters are spreading like a brush fire into remote and defenseless villages across northern [Afghanistan](#).

The fighters swarm into town, assemble the villagers and announce Taliban control, often at night and without any resistance.

With most Afghan and NATO troops stationed in the country's south and east, villagers in the path of the Taliban advance into the once-peaceful north say they are powerless and terrified, confused by the government's inability to prevail -- and ready to side with the insurgents to save their own lives.

"How did the Taliban get into every village?" [Israel](#) Arbah asked from his mud hut in the Shah Qassim village of Faryab province. "They are everywhere. And they are moving very fast. To tell you honestly, I am really, really afraid."

In the past year, security in northern Afghanistan has deteriorated rapidly as insurgents have seized new territory in provinces such as Kunduz and Baghlan, and even infiltrated the scenic mountain oasis of Badakhshan, where 10 members of a Christian charity's

medical team were massacred this month. Each new northern base is becoming a hive of activity, with fighters rotating in and out, daily planning meetings and announcements at the mosque.

For the first time this year, the U.S. military sent 3,000 troops to the north, based in Kunduz. A senior NATO official said that the soldiers have made progress in Kunduz and commanders are more confident than six months ago that they can halt growth in the north but that insurgents still find sanctuary in sparsely populated provinces where NATO and Afghan forces are undermanned.

The U.S. military does not believe the Taliban has made a strategic decision to target the north to avoid the bulk of NATO forces in the south, according to a U.S. military official. But a former senior Afghan intelligence official based in the north said that is "absolutely" what has happened.

One of those places is Faryab, a swath of rolling desert hills along the Turkmenistan border where a lone U.S. battalion of about 800 soldiers arrived this spring. Starting in the Gormach district and moving through a belt of Pashtun villages that have tribal links to Kandahar and the south, insurgents have spread to nearly all the districts in the province, according to Afghan officials.

They move constantly on unmarked dirt roads outside the cities to ambush Afghan police and soldiers and to kidnap residents. They execute those affiliated with the government and shut down reconstruction projects. They plant homemade bombs, close girls' schools, and take by force a portion of farmers' crops and residents' salaries.

"This is the new policy of the Taliban: to shift their people from the south to the north, to show they exist everywhere," said Faryab Gov. Abdul Haq Shafaq. "They're using the desert, where there are no security forces at all."

Letter precedes invasion

Before the Taliban invades a village, its arrival is sometimes preceded by a letter.

"Hello. I hope you're healthy and doing very well," Mullah Abdullah Khalid, a Taliban deputy district shadow governor, wrote recently to four tribal elders in a Faryab village. "Whatever support you could provide, either financially or physically, we would really appreciate that.

"We hope that you will not deny us."

But this is just a formality, because the Taliban is coming anyway.

In early November, the villagers of Khwaji Kinti awoke to the rumble of motorcycles. The next morning, they discovered that 30 to 40 Taliban, armed with Kalashnikovs and

rocket-propelled-grenades, had taken charge. Tribal elders pleaded with police to send help. None arrived.

The Taliban was welcomed by a sympathetic mullah and set to work quickly. From the shepherds, it expected "zakat," or charity: one sheep out of every 40; and it took "usher," an Islamic tax, from the wheat farmers: 10 percent of the harvest, according to villagers. Its members shut down the lone girls' school and demanded shelter and meals from different homes each night. Mohammad Hassan, a wheat farmer, said insurgents knocked on his door about once a week after the evening prayer, asking for food. "We're afraid of the Taliban and the government," he said. "We're caught in the middle -- we don't have any power."

Taliban members executed a man known as Sayid Arif, who they said worked for the Afghan government, by pulling him from his car and shooting him. They left him in the road with a note on his chest that said for whoever works with the government, "this is the punishment," said a tribal elder named Abdullah.

The Taliban began to settle disputes with arbitrary punishments -- which some consider its main public service. In one case, a dispute between a pair of brothers and another man escalated until the third man was shot. Without evidence, the Taliban chose one of the brothers, 22-year-old Mahadi, as the guilty party, villagers said. The Taliban assembled dozens of people, handed the wife of the victim a Kalashnikov and ordered her to shoot him, which she did.

"I stood there and watched that," one villager said.

Not everyone is unhappy with this. The headmaster of the boys' school in Khwaji Kinti, Agha Shejawuddin, said the Taliban is restoring order based on Islamic law. "The Koran says there should be public punishment," he said. "I think the situation under the Taliban will be better than this government."

On Aug. 5, members of the U.S. battalion, from the 10th Mountain Division, along with Afghan police and soldiers, fought the Taliban in Khwaji Kinti. This sparked an exodus, with hundreds of families fleeing town, villagers said. The U.S. soldiers decided to withdraw after three days "to prevent civilian property damage and loss of life and civilian disruption during the holy month of Ramadan," a military spokesman said.

That left the power balance unchanged, according to villagers reached by phone, and 200 to 400 Taliban members remain. The area "is still under complete Taliban control," one villager said.

Hostages at checkpoint

After a day of road building in January, two Chinese laborers and Saifullah, their 16-year-old driver, rolled up to a Taliban checkpoint on Highway 1.

They did not make it through.

The hostages -- including three other Afghans -- were taken to a village in Gormach, the most Taliban-infested district in Faryab.

"For five days, I had no news of my son," said Saifullah's father, Khairullah. "I decided to go and search for him. I told myself I would find him even if I got killed. I would go to that place."

No taxi driver would take him. He borrowed a car and went alone. In the village, he found a mosque and an adjacent house, with about 40 Afghan-assembled Pamir motorbikes outside. The buildings brimmed with gunmen.

"When I showed up, they were surprised. They said, 'Why did you come here?' " he recalled. "I told them, 'I want my son.' "

For four hours, he argued with the captors, explained his Islamic lineage and paid \$1,300. He received his son, with a warning: "You must promise that your son will never work for the foreigners again."

This is the message the Taliban regularly preaches in mosque speeches and in letters distributed to villagers. One such letter, passed out on Taliban stationery in Faryab, told villagers that "you are the nation that defeated the British again and again. Once more we want your compassion."

"Come together as one hand to defeat the infidels of the world," it read. "And make Afghanistan a Jewish and Christian cemetery."

The two Chinese workers captured with Saifullah would not be released for months. In a video of them in captivity, obtained by police, the Taliban taunted them.

"There is no God but God," a Taliban fighter said in Pashto, reciting a Koranic verse known as the Kalima. "Say it. Say it. Loudly."

The Chinese men stared, not comprehending.

"Why are you not learning?" their captor said. "You're not intelligent. You haven't learned anything. We're going to kill you."

Swelling the ranks

One day, a young Taliban fighter rode up on a donkey. Nek Mohammad, 29, hadn't seen him in years but remembered him as a fellow refugee. They had both lived in [Iran](#) during the Taliban government, two Tajiks in search of work and peace.

They sat by the river to talk.

"How is your life?" Mohammad asked.

Since he'd joined the Taliban, the man said, he earned more than \$400 a month. "They are paying me very well," he said. He asked Mohammad to join the insurgency.

The ranks of Taliban have swelled in Faryab because of such men: young and jobless, according to officials and residents.

They profess little allegiance to a government they view as irrelevant, at best, and exploitative, at worst. They trace the insecurity to the presence of NATO forces.

Afghan officials also see a rivalry between Pashtun tribes at play.

"If one tribe, like the Achekzai, creates 10 Taliban in their tribe, then the Tokhi says, we need 12 Taliban to defend ourselves," said Mohammad Sadiq Hamid Yar, the Qaysar district chief.

Extortion provides much of their funding, Afghan officials said, and Taliban leadership in [Pakistan](#) provides training, weapons, ammunition and additional income. Shafaq, the Faryab governor, estimated that at least 500 Taliban members are in his province, although others put the number far higher. The 1,800 police, he said, "are not enough," and the government hopes to form a 500-man militia to bolster them.

Although the new U.S. battalion has helped, Shafaq thinks that NATO troops need a more aggressive approach, including not being afraid to bomb motorcycle gangs as they crisscross the desert. If the Taliban forces have been allowed such freedom of movement, many residents reason, NATO must not be serious about fighting them. "Afghans are very familiar with this type of situation. We see which side of the scale is heavier, and we just roll to that side easily," Mohammad said. "Right now, the Taliban's scale is heavier."