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NATO surge on Taliban stronghold drives civilians into the line of fire

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People living in Kandahar have to endure sporadic gunfire as Nato tries to flush out the insurgents

The first eyewitness accounts of Nato's assault on the final Taliban sanctuary threatening Kandahar City have begun to emerge, painting a picture of sporadic fire fights, steady progress by Afghan and coalition forces, and flight by those inhabitants wealthy or lucky enough to escape the violence.

Earlier this week, Nato began its final and critical phase of a major offensive designed to clear Kandahar, the spiritual home of the Taliban, with hundreds of troops carrying out an air assault on the main insurgent base in the region. In interviews with The Independent, tribal elders, government officials and civilians in Kandahar City provided vivid descriptions of special forces night raids and Nato's bombardment of the area in the preceding month – designed to damage the local Taliban leadership – and the tactics the insurgents used to cow inhabitants before fleeing in the face of coalition firepower.

Mahmoud Dawood, a 35-year-old farmer from the western tip of the Horn of Panjwaii, the area Afghan and Nato forces are trying to take, described how he was woken last Thursday night by explosions in a neighbouring village. Suddenly the blasts came closer, and the silhouette of an Afghan commando appeared in his open door. "There was a bright white light and a voice said in Pashto 'Stand up'," he said.

"They took me, my brother and our neighbours" to a prison they'd established in a hamlet called Saidan, he added. Dawood claimed to be one of 66 prisoners held there, a figure confirmed by a local elder. The district governor, Haji Baran, confirmed that he had intervened to help secure the release of many of the prisoners following the weekend assault on the peninsula.

After being questioned and having biometric data taken, Dawood claimed he was taken home to fill sandbags as they turned his home into a firing point. "They made us walk in front," he said, "so if there was a mine we'd hit it."

His account of a night raid ahead of the actual assault on the Horn of Panjwahi tallied with other accounts of a month-long campaign by Nato to soften up the Taliban as a prelude to the attack.

"There's been fighting in Zangabad for the past month," the tribal elder Abdul Haq said. "There were night raids and [incoming] missiles but usually the days were calm and there was no fighting. Usually the missiles came from Kandahar airfield" – the main Nato base in southern Afghanistan, about 40km away. Deserted villages the Taliban used as staging points received a battering. Between them, the raids and the rockets appear to have shattered the local Taliban leadership.

"All the big commanders are in hiding or running scared," Mr Haq said. "Kaka Abdul Khaliq [a popular local commander known for his attempts to prevent die-hard foreign fighters endangering civilians] has been killed, I heard on the radio. Many commanders in Zangabad have been killed so really I don't know who is in charge. I hear the Taliban have left Zangabad for now." Like them, Mr Haq fled Zangabad last Saturday, soon after fighting began.

He is one of the lucky ones, wealthy enough to own a house in Kandahar City as well as his lands on the Horn itself, and close enough to a main road not to have to worry too much about the gauntlet of home-made mines laid by the Taliban. But for Saifullah, a 42-year-old farmer who was selling raisins in Kandahar City when word of the attack reached him, the problem was how to return and find his family.

It took him two days, circling around indirectly towards his village and taking the long route through vineyards and fields, avoiding roads and hiding from the Afghan National Army, before leading his relatives to safety back the way he'd come. "I was scared but I was anxious about my children," he said.

Another tribal elder, Haji Fazel Mohammad, said eight villagers from Mushan – at the western tip of the peninsula – had sought sanctuary at his house in Kandahar City. "They need advice on whether to return to Mushan and want to know what's happening. They ask whether to return [for good] or just go back for their belongings." The number of displaced people remains low, officials in Kandahar City said, and displacement is an annual occurrence, linked to the fighting season. "It's the burden of civilians [around here]," the head of the provincial repatriation department said.

Although being caught in the crossfire is now the predominant fear for many villagers, life under the Taliban brought its own dangers. The insurgents carried their weapons openly on the streets and everyone was "scared of them", Saifullah said.

"They searched people for telephones, government documents and weapons. They were always looking for spies, especially in the main bazaar and on the main road coming from Kandahar City."

Over the past 12 months, he said, they had hanged seven people they accused of espionage. An elder from Zangabad, a cluster of hamlets to the east, told of a teenager murdered by the Taliban because he had joined a local militia. They shot him in a mulberry grove where he had gone to eat fruit. "They had spies within the government who [shopped] him," Abdul Haq said, "and after questioning him and hearing out his story, they killed him. It was the third time they had arrested him. He was 17."

There was a Taliban court in Zangabad, dispensing swift if brutal justice, and reportedly in direct competition with Kandahar City courts, which are sluggish, expensive and corrupt. Elders also claimed that the Taliban used inhabitants as human shields. "The Taliban tell civilians not to flee and use them like a shield," Abdul Haq added. "They lay mines around their homes and they don't like people leaving their villages. But they flee all the same."

Most of those insurgents have gone now, and others have apparently resorted to civilian life, for the time being, anyway. "Most of the foreign fighters have fled to other districts, while the local Taliban have buried their weapons in the ground and are pretending to be civilians," said Haji Baran.

According to Mr Haq, the Panjwaii insurgents are few in number and poorly resourced. "One time they came to my [local] mosque and said, 'Please bring us lunch'. When I saw their weapons I noticed how old they were. They don't know how to use them properly and they had too few bullets for their Kalashnikovs."

For Nato and the Afghan government, the real challenge will begin when the insurgents start reinfiltrating the area, as they have in Marjah, in neighbouring Helmand, which was the scene of a Nato offensive earlier this year. "This is the trick of the Taliban," one man from Zangabad said. "They flee the fighting. Then slowly, slowly they return."

Fraud 'considerable' in Afghan elections

Almost a quarter of the 5.6 million votes cast in Afghanistan's parliamentary elections last month were invalid, election officials said on Wednesday, but they hailed the poll a success despite low turnout and complaints.

The top UN envoy in Afghanistan applauded the country's election body for its handling of the counting process, but said "considerable fraud" had occurred on polling day and called for those responsible to be held accountable.

Announcing preliminary results, Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission (IEC) said 5.6 million votes had been cast – more than a million above earlier estimates – but that it had thrown out 1.3 million of them.

The IEC also said that it had disqualified ballots collected from 2,543 of the 17,744 polling stations that opened for the elections on 18 September. "We can very proudly say that the turnout in this election process was higher than our expectations. In the current situation in Afghanistan, this is a success," IEC chairman Fazl Ahmad Manawi told a news conference.

The election for Afghanistan's lower house of parliament, or wolesi jirga, went ahead despite a Taliban threat to disrupt it, but Western nations have been wary of dubbing it a success after the fiasco of last year's fraud-marred presidential ballot.

Donors are less concerned about individual results for the 249 seats as they are about the level of fraud committed. The credibility of the vote will weigh heavily when Barack Obama reviews Washington's Afghan war strategy in December amid mounting violence, rising troop casualties and sagging public support.