

## South Asia

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### British 'success' under siege in Afghanistan

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

KARACHI - British troops have once again recaptured the less than a few square kilometers of the district headquarters of Musa Qala town in Helmand province from the Taliban, but, as before, it could turn out to be a pyrrhic victory.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) headquarters in Kabul have heralded this week's operations as a "most strategic and significant success" in the province, where 80% of Afghanistan's poppy cultivation is located.

British troops have seized Musa Qala before, but then have

become virtual prisoners in their barracks. Indeed, last year they were only able to vacate the town after striking a truce with the Taliban, who controlled all the surrounding areas of the inhospitable terrain.

The Taliban put up token resistance this week, according to a Taliban commander in Kandahar, Moulvi Abdul Jalil, who told Asia Times Online on telephone that the organisation now aims to concentrate its efforts on Kandahar province and has already captured two districts near Kandahar city.


With regard to Musa Qala, Mullah Noormal (a jihadi alias), a lieutenant of Mullah Abdul Bari, said in a satellite phone interview with Asia Times Online, "They [British] fired continuous artillery shells for two days on the civilian population and as a result the people evacuated the area. The Taliban did not receive any casualties as we did not actually fight. Civilians were the one victims. We were under the command of Mullah Abdul Bari and retreated when the troops rolled into town.

"Now that the troops are in Musa Qala, we have taken over positions nearby, namely the towns of Raigi and Shaban. The British troops are now once again trapped, like they were in 2006. We will now retaliate at a time of our choice. They don't have even offices to stay in in Musa Qala as we destroyed the Olaswali [administrative office] before leaving the town," said Noormal.

"Now they are in Musa Qala's headquarters and we are sitting in all the villages around Musa Qala. They don't have a way forward or backwards."

Noormal's comments could be taken with a pinch of salt, but they are not entirely untrue. This correspondent spent considerable time traveling in all the districts of Helmand province under the control of the Taliban (and also those under British control. He saw the area extensively through the eyes of the Taliban late last year and through the eyes of NATO forces early this year.

Beyond Greskh district, on the way to Musa Qala, there is no road network. Vehicles have to travel on wide deserted plains, following the tire marks of other vehicles. The average speed is less than 10 kilometers an hour. The approach to Musa Qala is marked by agriculture fields and tress. The town itself comprises some shops, a hospital, a few mosques and inns and the district headquarters.



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**NATO's obsession with Helmand**

It is clear that NATO is obsessed with Helmand province in order to complete the renovation of Kajaki Dam, a hydroelectric project that will ensure uninterrupted power supply to Kandahar and Helmand provinces. This is strategically significant for a backward region where roads do not exist and the people still rely on natural rain water reservoirs.

Helmand shares a lawless border with Pakistan through which smugglers carry goods to Iran via Pakistan's Balochistan province. Kandahar province lies to its east. The bumper poppy crops in Helmand that make their way through Pakistan and Iran to Europe earn the Taliban huge dividends to fuel their war against NATO. And the smuggling routes are reliable supply lines for arms and human resources to flow into Afghanistan.

From the province's southern district of Gramsir, bordering Pakistan, to the northern end of Baghran, large areas are partially or completely under Taliban control. Partial control means that district headquarters are under the control of the Kabul administration and all surrounding villages are under the control of the Taliban.

British authorities in Helmand confirm that poppy cultivation takes place across the province. Drug-processing labs are mostly in Taliban-controlled Sangin district, north of Gramsir. The trafficking routes pass through the government-controlled provincial capital of Lashkargah, between those two districts, with the connivance of Afghan security before going on through Taliban areas to Pakistan. Using exactly the same route via Pakistan, arms are smuggled into Helmand then spread all over Afghanistan.

In this context, NATO is once again desperate to cut off these vital arteries.

**The scope of success**

US-led forces entered Helmand province without much resistance during the invasion of 2001 because it was a collective tribal decision to say goodbye to the Taliban and welcome the new power. It was believed the incoming forces would be able to provide basic necessities such as water, electricity, food and ultimately prosperity.

This did not happen, while efforts were made to curtail poppy cultivation, a vital cash crop. By 2005, the tribes - once again unanimously - decided that it was time to boot out the foreign forces (rather than welcome the Taliban again) so they could grow their poppy and lead their lives according to their own traditions and tribal codes without the intervention of the non-local Afghan army and police.

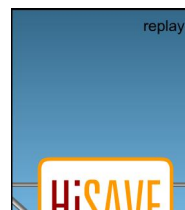
They did allow the Taliban to operate, and foreign forces were driven away from many areas. However, apart from Baghran district, which is completely ruled by the Taliban, and Lashkargah, which is run by the Afghan government, all districts are run by local tribal councils, which allow the Taliban to stay.

From December 2006 until now, British Commonwealth Office staff and the British task force stationed in Helmand have tried their level best to make Helmand "civilized". They have opened schools, rebuilt mosques, dug wells, launched programs for capacity building and many other development projects in coordination with tribal elders. But this has not delivered the expected results, as the population remains obsessed to drive out the foreigners.

It should be stressed that this does not necessarily mean that people are fully committed to the Taliban and their ways. Except for Baghran, most places are manned by pro-Taliban commanders who don't represent the Taliban hardcore - they are just local tribal warriors who have joined the Taliban rank and file for the time being.

The greatest challenge facing NATO is to retain control of the recaptured region of Musa Qala and win desperately needed indigenous support. This is possible through two means: complete administrative liberty for the people, which means tribal rule, and the financial freedom for them to grow poppy and trade (read smuggle). Once NATO agrees to this, the people will be won over and the Taliban will be sidelined.

It's a tough choice. Meanwhile, the Taliban have captured two districts near Kandahar to build up pressure in that province to



distract NATO from Helmand.

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