

RAF Chinook helicopter shot down in Afghanistan in Taliban election 'spectacular'

A British Chinook helicopter has been shot down in Helmand, Afghanistan, in an attempted Taliban "spectacular" designed to overshadow the country's make-or-break election.

By John Bingham and Thomas Harding
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Military sources confirmed that the helicopter came under attack from machine gun and rocket propelled grenade fire as it took off after a supply drop near Sangin in northern Helmand.

Despite a fire in the engine, the helicopter's pilots managed to fly it more than half a mile to safety before making an emergency landing.



British Chinook helicopters in Helmand province. Photo: PA

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The four crew members were then evacuated onto another Chinook and flown away from the scene.

A Nato air strike was then called in to destroy the damaged Chinook to prevent it falling into Taliban hands.

The attack bears some parallels with the downing of an RAF Hercules transporter in Iraq in January 2005, killing 10 servicemen on the day that millions of Iraqis went to the polls in a historic election.

The attempt also follows indications that the Taliban were planning to target coalition aircraft in a spectacular attack.

Although no one was injured, the loss of a Chinook is a major strategic blow to British forces.

It was one of only eight of the vitally important transporter helicopters in service in the country.

The Ministry of Defence said that enemy action had not been "ruled out" but sources confirmed that the helicopter had

come under fire.

Lt Col Nick Richardson, spokesman for Task Force Helmand, paid tribute to the pilots and crew.

"It is a measure of the bravery and skill of the pilots that, operating under enemy fire, they were able to complete their task and calmly move to safety," he said.

"Their cool under pressure has ensured that their lives were saved and minimal damage was caused.

"Despite the loss of one aircraft, the brave crew have thwarted insurgents attempts to destabilise the elections with a shocking spectacular loss of British life."

The distinctive twin rotar helicopters are vital to the British effort in Afghanistan, constantly in demand to transport troops and equipment as well as extracting wounded soldiers from the battlefield.

Despite being in short supply, their importance has grown with the increasing threat from roadside bombs targeting convoys and patrols on the ground.

British units have been forced to rely on foreign helicopters during the recent Panther's Claw operation in the run-up to the election.

Last month David Cameron, the Conservative leader, described the Government's failure to supply more helicopters as a "scandal".

A batch of eight to 10 Chinooks, currently being refitted to bolster British operations in Afghanistan, is not expected to be ready until December.

A Ministry of defence spokesman said: "The cause of the incident is still under investigation, however enemy action has not been ruled out.

"In the short term other UK aircraft in Regional Command (South) and those operated by our Nato partners will be able to cover the helicopter lift requirement.

"In the medium term, the UK's Joint Helicopter Command is already planning the replacement of this airframe."

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Taliban destroy Chinook in attempted election 'spectacular'

A British Chinook helicopter has been shot down in an attempted Taliban “spectacular” designed to overshadow Afghanistan’s election day.

Thomas Harding and John Bingham

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The loss of one of only eight vitally important RAF Chinooks in Afghanistan is a serious setback for British forces at a time when roadside bombs have forced an increasing reliance on helicopters.

It is the first time the Taliban have taken out a British helicopter and will be signalled as a significant victory for the insurgents.

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The four crew members escaped with their lives after a well planned ambush which forced the destruction of one of Britain’s most important military assets in Helmand Province.

Defence sources warned that Taliban commanders could now be preparing to take another “major scalp” by targeting a helicopter packed with troops.

The attack shows that insurgents are now capable of taking out heavily armoured aircraft from the ground with rocket-propelled grenades and machine-gun fire.

“This changes the whole game plan,” said a defence source. “It means that they cannot guarantee the security of helicopter re-supplying forward bases with troops and equipment.

“Without doubt the Taliban will keep on trying until they get another one.”

Amid heightened fears over the level of protection offered by new helicopters, opposition politicians warned that the attack was a “disaster waiting to happen”.

The helicopter was targeted by ground fire as it left a patrol base north of the near the volatile town of Sangin, where 20 British troops have been killed this year, late on Wednesday evening.

As it lifted out of the small base after dropping off supplies and men, it came under sustained ground fire from Taliban who had seen it land minutes earlier.

At least one of the £40 million aircraft’s two engines was set on fire but the pilots were able to fly the crippled helicopter almost a mile away from the ambush site where they put it down in an emergency landing.

The crew of two pilots and two door gunners scrambled out and were picked up by the accompanying Chinook. All helicopters in Afghanistan operate in pairs for just such an emergency.

Despite the value of the helicopter no attempt was made to secure the crash site to carry out an analysis of the incident or to recover reusable parts. Instead a Nato fighter was called in to drop a bomb on the Chinook in order to prevent it being used by the Taliban for propaganda purposes.

"It is a measure of the bravery and skill of the pilots that, operating under enemy fire, they were able to complete their task and calmly move to safety," said Lt Col Nick Richardson, the British military spokesman.

"Their cool under pressure has ensured that their lives were saved. Despite the loss of one aircraft, the brave crew have thwarted insurgents' attempts to destabilise the elections with a shocking spectacular loss of British life."

The helicopter's destruction will come as a significant blow to the British force in Helmand which is already struggling with a force reduced now to seven Chinooks.

The Daily Telegraph reported in April that the Taliban were planning a "show stopper" after intelligence was received that they were deliberately targeting a British Chinook that can carry up to 40 fully-laden troops.

It is possible that the Taliban might have managed to use heavy anti-aircraft artillery such as a Soviet era ZPU-1 mounted on a truck.

The bullets from the 14.5mm cannon would have hit the aircraft like a "brick wall" according to defence experts. Three ZPUs were destroyed by Nato aircraft in early spring.

The incident also comes a month after the insurgents destroyed a giant Mi26 Halo helicopter after it had ferried supplies into Sangin killing six Ukrainian aircrew.

It is possible that a substantial relief convoy of 116 vehicles that arrived in the town this week was forced on commanders as the area has become too dangerous for helicopters.

This newspaper has already reported that six Merlin helicopters heading to Afghanistan later this year are not suitably armoured for combat operations and will be more vulnerable to ground fire.

To date the British have lost one Hercules, a Nimrod reconnaissance aircraft, two Reaper drones and the Chinook during the Afghanistan conflict.

The distinctive twin rotor Chinook helicopters are vital to the British effort in Afghanistan, constantly in demand to transport troops and equipment as well as extracting wounded soldiers from the battlefield.

Despite being in short supply, their importance has grown with the increasing threat from roadside bombs targeting convoys and patrols on the ground.

British units have been forced to rely on foreign helicopters during the recent Panther's Claw operation in the run-up to the election.

Last month David Cameron, the Conservative leader, described the Government's failure to supply more helicopters as a "scandal".

Nick Harvey, the Liberal Democrat defence spokesman, warned that the attack had been a "disaster waiting to happen" and said it underlined the need for all new aircraft to have the maximum protection against attack.

"It is a blessing that the crew escaped but it very easily might not have been so," he said.

"This must serve as a generalised warning.

A batch of eight Chinooks, currently being refitted to bolster British operations in Afghanistan, is not expected to be ready

until December.

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