

Taliban retreating from Musa Qala, says police chief

LASHKARGAH, Dec 10 (Pajhwok Afghan News): Officials Monday claimed Taliban fighters were retreating from their stronghold in the shambolic Helmand province, where Coalition and Afghan forces killed several insurgents in an attack a day earlier.

Afghan National Army (ANA) and NATO soldiers - having broken the enemys first line of defence - were advancing on the centre of the Taliban-controlled Musa Qala district, the Helmand police chief told Pajhwok Afghan News.

Brig. Gen. Muhammad Hussein Andiwai said the militants were being pushed back to Baghran and Sangin districts as a result of the joint offensive that got under way on Friday. The assault aimed at retaking the embattled town from the guerillas had been a success, he insisted.

Fierce fighting was going on for the control of the district, said resident Muhammad Shah. Like other civilians, we too are faced with great hardships, spending winter nights under the open sky, he said, adding the warring parties were using heavy weapons.

Also on Monday, the US-led Coalition said several militants were killed and 10 others captured during an operation targeting insurgent networks in the town. At least two civilians were wounded in the fighting sparked by a search of compounds in Musa Qala.

The attack targetted people associated with a weapons facilitator, believed to have been killed in an earlier precision strike in the area, the Coalition said. It added the combined force detained 10 people suspected of having links to insurgent weapons facilitation networks.

A day earlier, two important insurgent commanders were seized as Afghan and NATO troops pressed on with the joint offensive. Mullah Matin Akhund and Mullah Rahim Akhund were detained during the ongoing operation codenamed Zafar (Success).

Under a controversial agreement, the British military withdrew from the Taliban stronghold and handed it over to local tribal elders in October 2006, but four months later the town fell to the guerrillas, who have since been in control.

Senior British official have since acknowledged the mistake in doing the deal with the locals that saw rebels return to the area, where they enjoy widespread influence.

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