

***Taliban confirm withdrawal from Musa Qala***

LASHKARGAH, Dec 10  
(Pajhwok Afghan News)

After several days of intense fighting, Taliban guerrillas have withdrawn from the Musa Qala district they controlled for more than 10 months, a spokesman for the militant movement confirmed on Monday.

The insurgents left the district this afternoon in order to avoid civilian casualties in the fierce clashes, touched off by an Afghan-NATO offensive on the town, Qari Yousaf Ahmadi informed Pajhwok Afghan News over the telephone.

Ahmadi added the rebels retreated from their bastion in the volatile Helmand province just before 1.00pm - hours after a relentless overnight bombardment by NATO and Coalition warplanes. Tens of ordinary residents were massacred in the ruthless airstrikes, he claimed.

Eight insurgents had been killed and another six wounded during the fighting hitherto, Ahmadi added. He claimed up to 30 Afghan and foreign soldiers had perished in the clashes triggered by the operation that began on Friday.

Moments earlier, a senior defence official said Afghan soldiers - backed by International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Coalition troops - had stormed into the Taliban-held town. The soldiers were busy purging the district's suburban areas of militants.

In an exclusive chat with Pajhwok, Gen. Zahir Azimi insisted the troops were closing in on Taliban positions in the embattled town. However, he gave no more details of the offensive aimed at wresting back the control of the rebel stronghold.

Earlier in the day, Pajhwok's correspondent based in Lashkargah quoted a police chief as saying the fighters were retreating from their positions and the soldiers - having broken the enemy's first line of defence - were advancing on the centre of the district.

Brig. Gen. Muhammad Hussein Andiwal said the militants were being pushed back to Baghran and Sangin districts as a result of the sweep.

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.

On Sunday, 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.

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