

Afghanistan: Operation Achilles Heel?

Author: [IWPR trainees](#)

International forces claim success in their latest operation in Helmand, but locals say the Taleban stopped fighting so that the opium poppy harvest could go ahead.

As international forces in Afghanistan's Helmand region engage in their biggest offensive yet to drive the Taleban out of the north of the troubled province, everyone agrees the insurgents have not put up much of a fight.

However, IWPR has been told by local residents that the relative calm has little to do with a successful security operation. Instead, they say, the Taleban have staged a tactical withdrawal to prevent the opium harvest being harmed by fighting.

Operation Achilles, which began on March 6, was billed as "the largest multinational combined operation launched to date", and will eventually involve 4,500 troops from the International Security Force, ISAF, and up to 1,000 Afghan National Security Forces, ANSF.

An ISAF press release issued on April 16 suggested that the tough tactics were working, "Helmand province showing signs of [economic] growth due to increasing security."

The reason for the improvement, ISAF said, was Operation Achilles.

Helmand residents were left either chuckling or shaking their heads at the suggestion. From their vantage point at ground zero in the conflict, the new phase of relative calm will be temporary.

"There are no big problems in Helmand right now because everyone is busy with the poppy harvest," said Abdul Halek, from Nawzad district. "The elders have asked the Taleban to leave until the harvest is in, so that NATO does not come and bomb the fields or the harvesters. But I don't know what will happen afterwards."

Six weeks in, the results of Operation Achilles are mixed. The bombing campaign is terrorising civilian residents - potentially winning new recruits for the Taleban - while yielding little in the way of concrete results.

The one major victory for ISAF came in early April, when foreign troops assisted by ANSF took back the district centre of Sangin, a little over 50 kilometres north of the provincial capital Lashkar Gah.

ISAF issued a statement on the battle just after the district centre was recaptured. "Over the course of the last two days, we have reduced the enemy's ability to destabilise the government of Afghanistan. By doing so, we are one step closer to creating a secure, stable and prosperous environment in which reconstruction and development can take place," it said.

But reports from Sangin suggest that it may be too soon to celebrate. The Taleban, with typical bravado, have sworn to fight to the end.

“We don’t care about Operation Achilles,” a top Taliban commander in Sangin district, who asked not to be named, told IWPR. “We will never leave Sangin. We withdrew from the centre [town of Sangin] because the tribal elders asked us to. They told us, ‘You can’t fight here any more right now because it’s time to harvest the poppy. You have to go.’ So we left, and ISAF came in.

“But now we’re ready to fight again.”

Mullah Qasem, a Taliban commander in northern Helmand, accepted that the overwhelming ISAF presence had also been a factor in persuading the insurgents to pull back.

“We did withdraw from Sangin,” he said. “It was a tactic. NATO brought many troops to the area, and we did not want to fight them. But now we have dug trenches and we are prepared to take back the district centre very soon.”

This will be bad news for residents still reeling from the last onslaught. They are angry at the damage caused by NATO bombs, and even more unhappy about the behaviour of the troops on the ground.

“ISAF troops enter our houses without permission and conduct searches,” said Habibullah, a Sangin resident.

“Our people are complaining about ISAF,” said Hajji Abdul Qadir, a tribal leader. “They drop bombs on our houses and destroy them. We want ISAF to take care of the local people.”

Searches and bombing are not the only problems residents are facing.

Once the Taliban were driven out of Sangin town, Afghan police went on the rampage, looting homes and stores.

“I had a shop in the bazaar,” said Nisar Ahmad. “Men in uniforms stole everything. It was the only source of income I had, and they took goods worth 1.4 million kaldars [23,000 US dollars]. Now there’s nothing left but an empty shop.”

Gul Agha, 45, who owns a clothing shop, had a similar tale. “This is the first time I have seen the government authorities looting shops,” he said. “I saw armed men in uniform come and begin to rob the bazaar. They also came to my shop, and took away some very expensive fabrics.”

Afghan government officials, including provincial governor Asadullah Wafa and the chief of police, confirmed that looting had taken place and promised to punish the perpetrators.

General Lawang of the Afghan National Army, ANA, told IWPR that the police had done most of the damage, but they had been aided by foreign troops and ANA forces as well.

“The ANA returned some of the items back to their owners,” he said, adding that the army also took some police into custody following the incident.

Some residents are now wondering whether it was a good idea to ask the Taliban to leave.

“If the government and foreigners won’t help us then we have to support the Taliban,” said one man.

Governor Wafa visited Sangin last week, where he addressed a council of tribal elders and extended his condolences to those who had lost family members in the battle.

He pledged new reconstruction efforts designed to woo the local population back to the side of the government.

“I will do my best to help you people,” he said. “The president has promised that the Kajaki dam will be rebuilt. And we will build 90 kilometres of roads inside Sangin.”

Sangin is one of Helmand’s largest districts, and a strategically important centre. The switching station that distributes electricity generated by the Kajaki dam to the north is located in Sangin. Whoever controls it can shut down the power to Lashkar Gah, and even to the major city of Kandahar to the east.

Throughout the winter and early spring, much of Lashkar Gah was in darkness due to fighting in the Sangin area.

After the Sangin victory, many expected that ISAF would move to retake Musa Qala, which has been openly controlled by the Taliban since early February. But so far, things are quiet, and residents are settling into their new lives.

“Right now, everything is fine in Musa Qala,” said Zahir Jann, a resident. “We have returned and we are working day and night to rebuild our homes which were destroyed by NATO bombs. We feel better now that there is no more bombing. We can hear some small-arms fire on the outskirts, but we don’t know who is doing it.”

Hanif, also from Musa Qala, has not yet gone home. He is staying in Lashkar Gah and waiting for the government to recapture his native city.

“The government cannot bring security, they are making us more and more insecure,” he said. “Every day they proclaim loudly that they’re going to launch operations, but nothing happens. Meanwhile, young people are captured and executed as spies.”

Helmand, along with much of Afghanistan, is still grieving over the murder of Ajmal Naqshbandi, a young journalist and translator who was kidnapped by the Taliban in Helmand in early March.

Ajmal was executed after five weeks in captivity, when the government refused to bow to Taleban demands to release two detainees in return for his freedom. The Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomo, whom Ajmal was accompanying when he was captured, was freed after the government released five Taleban prisoners, while a third man, driver Sayed Agha, was murdered by his captors.

In the wake of Ajmal's murder, Afghan journalists united to organise a one-week boycott of reporting on the Taleban. Casualty figures and news of future Taleban plans have therefore been scarce on the ground.

The government has filled the news vacuum with its own upbeat account of the Helmand operation.

"Soon we will chase the Taleban out, and we will be able to control the districts," said Nabijan Mullahkhel, chief of police in Helmand.

He refused to comment on why it was taking so long for the military to move against Musa Qala, however. "Go and ask NATO what is going on," he said.

Local residents are impatient with claims that the situation is improving.

"It's a lie," said Qudrat in Lashkar Gah. "Things are not getting better. I saw ISAF troops fire on a car yesterday. They could have killed the children who were playing nearby. I don't like the Taleban, but the foreign troops are worse."

IWPR is running a journalism training and reporting project in Helmand. This piece is a compilation of reports by the trainees.

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