

## **Helmandis Fear Taleban Noose Tightening**

**Author:** [IWPR trainees](#)

They suspect insurgents are close to taking full control of province, despite official claims that they are being pushed back.

The Helmand authorities and international officials appear to be struggling to keep a lid on mounting local panic over a recent Taleban offensive which is said to have taken them to the very outskirts of the provincial capital.

Afghans fleeing fighting last month in a district abutting Lashkar Gah say the Taleban noose is tightening around the regional centre. Many have sought refuge in the town, one of the few secure areas in the province, straining its limited resources.

Fighting is no longer confined to remote areas of Helmand, with Taleban raids extending to within several kilometres of the capital, making the Helmand River, which borders Lashkar Gah, the front line in the war on the insurgents.

Following the latest clashes, the Taleban reportedly remain in control of significant part of Nad Ali, after apparently briefly holding the district centre in late August, prompting scores of locals to flee the area.

Local officials and representatives of the British military, which is charged with protecting the province, have sought to play down the reported deterioration in the security situation, insisting the Taleban are in fact being pushed back.

Helmand, the southern Afghan province that alone produces close to 60 per cent of the world's heroin, has been a centre of the insurgency for over two years. Now, according to those who've endured the fighting, the Taleban have mounted a desperate push to gain complete control.

Nada Ali district, whose provincial boundary is just ten km from Lashkar Gah, was previously thought to be safe from the insurgents. Now, say those who have left their homes, the area is heavily infiltrated by Taleban, with fierce clashes taking place frequently. Just three weeks ago, according to many, it came close to total collapse.

Abdul Ahad Helmandwal, a prominent tribal leader of Nad Ali, said the district centre came under siege on August 22, after two police checkpoints were overrun in Marja, a nearby settlement. Eyewitnesses say that the Taleban were standing on the rooftops of shops in the bazaar in the district centre, firing on the government headquarters, where police were pinned down, unable to flee.

"Fighting started in Nad Ali this morning," said Helmandwal in a telephone interview with IWPR on Friday, August 22. "Slowly the circle closed around the district centre. The Taleban finally stopped at a radius of 400 metres from the centre, and were not able to proceed further."

"The district centre was full of police who had fled from Marja, as well as those from checkpoints in other parts of the district, who came to Nad Ali to mount the resistance."

Shortly after 1 pm, local residents began to phone IWPR, saying that the battle was becoming more and more bloody.

“Feel sorry for us,” said Abdul Hakim, a resident of Shin Kalai village in Nad Ali. “Dozens of families are leaving their homes. I don’t know how many people have been killed, but a lot of animals have died. There are spent bullets everywhere, landing in people’s homes.”

At 2 pm, the Taleban claimed that they had seized control of Nad Ali.

“We have captured the entire district of Nad Ali, except the district centre,” said Mullah Izat, a local Taleban commander, who called IWPR to report the victory.

The police inside the district centre were desperate for help. But it was slow to arrive.

“There was no support from ISAF,” said one officer, speaking on condition of anonymity. “Only late that evening did they come and break the siege.”

This account differs greatly from those of the government and officers from the International Security Assistance Force, ISAF, who deny that the situation was ever that serious.

“There is no siege in Nad Ali,” said Habibullah, district governor of Nad Ali, speaking by telephone on the evening of August 22. “But the fighting is still going on there. The police and ANA (Afghan National Army) are fighting the Taleban. We have not contacted the foreigners directly, but we have asked for help from the chief of police.”

Police chief Hussein Andiwai also downplayed the battle, saying that the situation was under control

“The operation has been going on since yesterday,” said Andiwai, speaking by phone on the morning of August 23. “There have been no casualties to police or ANA forces, I have no idea about the Taleban. But the province is fine.”

He denied reports that Marja had collapsed.

“Marja is not completely under Taleban control,” he told IWPR. “Only two police checkpoints that were coming under frequent Taleban attacks have shifted. We are now working on getting them back.”

Andiwai maintained that the panic was unwarranted.

“Marja is just a small area, it used to be very green and beautiful, with a high school, but now it is all ashes, because of the Taleban,” he said.

The police chief confirmed that the police had not requested assistance from ISAF.

“We did not think there was a need for ISAF to get involved,” he said, claiming that Helmand’s residents were falling victim to rumours spread by the Taleban themselves.

“Today’s enemy is very good at this propaganda business,” Andiwal told IWPR.

Lieutenant Colonel David Reynolds, spokesperson for the British forces in Helmand, told IWPR that the British were ready to help, if asked.

“We have never failed to respond to requests for assistance,” he said. “But the new administration in Helmand wishes to conduct operations by themselves to a greater extent.”

Helmand governor Gulab Mangal, speaking to journalists on the morning of August 23, painted a grim picture.

“I confirm that, as of right now, in Marja and the rest of Nad Ali, the situation is not good,” he told reporters. “There is a lot of unrest. But it is not true that the foreigners are not helping us. In most places we try to decrease the chance of involvement of foreign forces in operations. If something bad happens, if there is a bombing, it will have negative consequences. So sometimes we do not want the foreigners involved.”

Several recent bombing raids have resulted in civilian casualties, which inflame the population and fuel support for the Taleban.

Within 24 hours of the Taleban’s raid, the district centre was back under government control. But, according to residents and a government official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, Marja is still with the Taleban.

Those who have been forced to leave their homes are angered by the government’s failure to rescue their villages.

“Life has become very hard in Marja,” said Mohammad Ibrahim, who has moved his family to Lashkar Gah. “There are a lot of Taleban, not only local but foreign. They cannot even speak proper Pashto. There are not more than ten families left in our village, and they have all joined the Taleban.”

Mohammad Rasool, also from Marja, confirms the presence of foreign fighters.

“There used to be no Taleban at all in Marja,” he told IWPR. “Now you find them from every country. There are a lot of Afghans, but there are also Baluch and Punjabis,” he said, referring to areas of the Pakistan border districts. “There are so many Taleban with so much weaponry that the government cannot defeat them.”

But Lieutenant Colonel Reynolds flatly denies that the Taleban hold sway in Marja.

“In Marja there was a very, very small pocket of Taleban causing trouble, and it was quickly resolved,” he told IWPR. “[Police Chief] General Andiwal and [Afghan army] General Mohaidin have full control in Marja.”

This is cold comfort to those who have been displaced by the fighting.

Hajji Qasem left his home in Marja to live in a storefront in Lashkar Gah, which lacks even a door.

“I had to move,” he said. “Where I was living was a centre of fighting. The Taleban were shooting at a checkpoint from behind my house. Then the British came and started to attack our house – they shot missiles at us, and killed one of my brothers and his little daughter. Then every day the British were coming and searching my house – you have to understand how unacceptable this is. I could not take it any more, so we had to get ourselves out.”

British troops have been engaging the Taleban across Nad Ali district over the past few weeks, but Qasem’s claim could not be independently verified as IWPR went to press.

With Marja seemingly under control of the Taleban, residents fear that the rest of Nad Ali may soon fall.

Jan Mohammad has come to Lashkar Gah from Chan Jir, a village in Nad Ali. He left his profitable car repair business and is unemployed in the capital, but he was too afraid of the security situation to remain.

“Taleban are walking around my village in groups,” he told IWPR. “It is only 13 kilometres from Lashkar Gah. They have new types of light and heavy weapons, and they say they will fight to the end.”

The increasing instability of Nad Ali has residents angry at the central government.

“If Karzai has power, then he should do something,” said Gul Khan, from the Loy Manda area of Nad Ali. “If he has no power, he should just quit, like [Pervez] Musharraf (the former president of Pakistan).”

“He lives in peace behind thick walls. I had a house and land in Loy Manda, but the fighting there is like Doomsday. I have brought my family to a tent in Lashkar Gah, and my small children are suffering in the heat. What kind of government is this?”

But officials dispute reports that large numbers of families have been driven out of Marja and Nad Ali.

“It is not correct to say that many families have been displaced,” said Abdul Satar Muzahari, head of

Helmand's department of refugees. "Some families have left their homes, and are now visiting their relatives for a short time. God willing, these people will be able to return to their homes very soon."

Helmandis are not hopeful. On the contrary, some say they are afraid that stability may soon be confined to a narrow area around the Provincial Reconstruction Team, PRT, the foreign base in the centre of Lashkar Gah.

"There will come a day when the whole government of Helmand will be living inside the PRT," said one tribal elder, speaking on condition of anonymity. "And outside the PRT everything will be under the Taleban."

But Lieutenant Colonel Reynolds insists that the situation is improving.

"When ISAF came here in 2006, southern Afghanistan was the last stronghold of the Taleban," he said. "The Taleban were using the area for lots of illegitimate reasons, ruling the area using narcotics. These groups have been depleted, they are now much smaller. In Lashkar Gah we have a new airport and an industrial park, we have lots of projects to help the true Afghans, the real people of the country do what they want, get back to normality and enjoy their type of cultural democracy."

IWPR reporters in Helmand have requested that their names be withheld for security reasons.

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