

## **Second Helmand District Falls to Taleban**

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The Taleban have taken control of their second Helmand district in less than two weeks, say district officials.

The Taleban captured the police chief of Washir district and 30 of his officers when they were out on patrol Sunday, February 11, according to a high-ranking district official, who wanted his identity withheld.

“They then went to the district centre, where they took control, disarming the rest of the police,” said the official.

A Taleban spokesman in Washir, speaking by satellite phone, confirmed the seizure, but added that Taleban presence in Washir was nothing new.

“We have had control over Washir for some two months now,” said the spokesman, who also wished to remain anonymous.

Washir is a sparsely populated district in Helmand’s northwest corner. Bordering the provinces of Nimroz and Farah, it is home mainly to poppy growers and livestock herders.

The loss of Washir followed close on the collapse of Musa Qala, a district slightly to the south of Washir.

On February 1, the Taleban raised their white banner over the Musa Qala district centre, putting an end to a tenuous and controversial ceasefire agreement, brokered by village elders last October, between the Taleban and the mainly British NATO forces that control the province.

NATO and the Afghan government are reported to be considering their reaction to the Musa Qala takeover, but for now the insurgents remain in control.

Details were scarce on Monday, February 12. Spokesman for the interior ministry Zemerai Bashiry said he had no information on the status of Washir.

Residents were also bewildered by the turn of events.

“I do not know what is going on here,” said Noormahmad, a resident of Washir. “The village is empty, no one is going to the bazaar. We are afraid there will be fighting.”

Over the past several months, the battle for Afghanistan’s increasingly troubled southern region has moved to Helmand, a province noted mainly for its thriving narcotics industry. Helmand grows approximately 42 per cent of the country’s opium poppy, and supplies almost 90 per cent of the world’s heroin.

The Taleban have been highly visible in the area, and have mounted frequent attacks on the NATO troops who took over from the US-led coalition forces last summer.

Heavy fighting is reported in the northern district of Kajaki, location of the dam that supplies the bulk of Helmand's hydroelectric power.

The capital, Lashkar Gah, is in danger of being overwhelmed by the flood of refugees from the areas controlled by the Taleban. Some 1,000 families have come down from Musa Qala, according to provincial officials, joining an additional 3,000 families already displaced by the fighting.

"I just came from my home," said one Washir resident, who did not want to give his name for fear of reprisals. "There were Taleban there, I saw them with their guns and their motorcycles. No one can control them. They have more power than the government."

**Focus:** [Afghanistan](#)

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