

Kandahar: the Taliban's last stronghold in Afghanistan falls

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The Taliban have abandoned their last remaining stronghold in southern Afghanistan in a deal brokered by the country's interim prime minister Hamid Karzai. Last Friday militia groups from rival Pashtun tribes began taking over Kandahar, Afghanistan's second largest city, as well as other towns in the region.

The fall of Kandahar, which was the first major city seized by the Taliban in November 1994, effectively marks the end of the regime. Less than a month ago, the Taliban held an estimated 90 percent of Afghanistan. Since the loss of the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif in early November, it has been forced to abandon every major city, including the capital Kabul.

Heavily-armed US marines backed by attack helicopters are hunting down groups of Taliban fighters who fled Kandahar, in particular targeting the Taliban leaders and any foreign supporters. Around 1,300 marines along with US, British and Australian special forces troops are operating from a base 80 kilometres south of the city to seal off the entire area and turn it into a killing ground.

A spokesman, Marine Captain Stewart Upton, left no doubt as to what was intended. "If the mission has changed, it is that we are looking for Al Qaeda, instead of Taliban. We hope the Taliban realises that if he doesn't drop his arms and raise his hands, he dies," he said. US soldiers have been issued with photographs of senior Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders who are to be either captured or killed.

An article in the latest *Time* magazine details the ghoulish function of the "intelligence fusion cell" based at the US Central Command headquarters in Tampa, Florida where a running "scorecard" is maintained on top Al Qaeda or Taliban leaders. "Most of the names accompany colour photographs of varying quality. When good news comes in, a fresh version is

printed with a bold INJ or KIA (injured or killed) printed across the picture. 'If there is nothing there,' says a Pentagon official, 'it means he is a work in progress'."

An estimated 200 foreign Taliban fighters are reportedly surrounded at Kandahar airport by militia loyal to the former Kandahar governor Gul Agha Shirzai. A CNN reporter described the scene as he entered Kandahar over the weekend. "As we pass the airport, we could hear gunfire. There's a lot of destruction, a lot of destroyed vehicles, a lot of dead bodies on the roadside." Agha's troops had the Taliban forces surrounded and were intending to starve them into surrender.

Details of fighting in the Kandahar area are scanty. US Cobra helicopters and fighter aircraft attacked a Taliban convoy including Soviet-era military vehicles on November 27 as it reportedly moved towards the US Marine base. The US military also announced that its troops had killed seven Taliban soldiers in fighting last Friday. At the behest of the US, the Pakistani military has reinforced the border with extra troops and surveillance flights to prevent Taliban fighters from crossing.

There are few reports of the conditions inside Kandahar. The city has been subject to weeks of continuous US bombing, aid supplies have been halted and thousands of people have fled towards Pakistan. At least five people have died in fighting between rival militia groups battling for control of the city. While Agha claimed the right to resume his post as governor, the surrender deal negotiated by interim prime minister Karzai was for the Taliban to hand over their heavy weapons and the city to another tribal warlord Naqibullah Alokzai.

For Karzai, who had been nominated to head the UN-

sponsored interim administration in Afghanistan just days before, his reputation was at stake. His claim to represent the ethnic Pashtun in the Afghanistan government rested on his ability to seize and control Kandahar. A meeting of tribal leaders convened by Karzai over the weekend worked out a temporary arrangement—Agha was to be interim governor and Naqibullah his deputy. But the situation was still uncertain yesterday.

The same chaotic pattern has emerged throughout the country as rival warlords, militia commanders and tribal leaders each seek to stake out their old territories. Part of the impetus for the formation of the Taliban was the anarchy that existed in the Kandahar area in the early 1990s. The fundamentalist Taliban or “students” won a certain sympathy among local people for dishing out vigilante justice to militia commanders and petty warlords who were notorious for their brutality and corruption. Now these same militias have reemerged.

The British-based *Independent* reported rival groups establishing checkpoints on the road from Pakistan to Kandahar. “The road to the city was said to be littered with dead bodies and the remains of smashed cars. There are already 15 checkpoints set up by rival groups on the way from the nearby Pakistani border crossing to the city, according to aid organisations that tried to reach the city. Several convoys passed through, but all said they were robbed of their humanitarian supplies.”

A report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* described the situation at Spin Boldak on the Pakistani border: “Now armed gangs of tribal fighters cruise the streets where Taliban and Al Qaeda militants were the day before, while their elders are still arguing over the spoils of victory. There is unchecked looting and sporadic gunfire. A relief convoy with urgently needed food, medicines and blankets is stalled on the Pakistani side after one truck was hijacked as soon as it crossed the border.”



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