

Recapture of Afghan town highlights crisis of US, NATO occupation

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A major NATO operation in the southern Afghan province of Helmand finally succeeded on Monday in driving anti-occupation fighters out of the town of Musa Qala. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who was in Afghanistan at the time, was quick to claim a victory. But the protracted battle for control of the small centre underscores the tenuous nature of the US-led occupation of the country in the face of widespread popular hostility.

The retaking of Musa Qala points to the failure of NATO's so-called "hearts and minds" efforts. The British military withdrew from the town last October after securing a deal with local Afghan tribal elders to keep the Taliban out. Hundreds of Taliban fighters, who had remained active throughout the surrounding district, stormed the town centre in February, disarmed the local police and raised their flag over the district headquarters.

The Taliban entrenched themselves despite NATO air strikes and held onto Musa Qala for 10 months, using it as a base of operations to harass foreign and Afghan government forces in the district. The nearby Kajaki dam complex—the largest reconstruction project in southern Afghanistan—came under repeated attack. The town is also a centre for the country's illicit opium industry, which supplies more than 90 percent of the world's illegal heroin.

The operation to retake Musa Qala began last month, but was only officially announced on December 4. Some 50 British armoured vehicles conducted a large-scale probing operation on November 12, reaching the outskirts of the town, then withdrawing. NATO war planes conducted a series of air strikes, which the Taliban claimed killed Afghan civilians. Last Friday a large British, US, Danish and Estonian force was inserted by helicopter near the town, backed by a

battalion of Afghan troops.

Thousands of residents fled the town fearing a bloody battle, but the Taliban pulled out on Monday without offering serious resistance. Spokesman Qari Yousuf Ahmadi declared that the Taliban would remain in the district. "We will carry out a hit-and-run war. Losing Musa Qala doesn't mean that we will stop fighting," he told the media. Ahmadi claimed to have lost only eight fighters in three days of fighting and accused NATO forces of killing civilians in fighting nearby.

The Afghan defence ministry announced on Wednesday that "over 50 terrorists" had been killed over two days. Afghan President Hamid Karzai claimed that the high profile of the Afghan National Army proved it was becoming more capable. Afghan troops will remain in the town along with a small contingent of British soldiers. It is far from certain, however, that Musa Qala will remain under NATO control, let alone provide a shining example of the "Afghanisation" of the military occupation.

While Prime Minister Brown was upbeat in the British parliament on Wednesday on the prospects for a greater role for Afghans in Afghanistan, he nevertheless indicated that a "substantial" British military presence would remain for the "foreseeable future". He also announced a three-year aid package of \$920 million starting from 2009—a pittance for a country that remains mired in poverty and economic backwardness nearly seven years after the US invasion in late 2001.

In comments before a congressional committee on Tuesday, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates and Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, were far more negative in their assessment. Mullen revealed that the number of attacks on occupation and Afghan government forces jumped significantly over the past year—by 27 percent overall

and a 60 percent in Helmand Province. He also reported polls indicating that support for the Taliban had risen to 23 percent in the country's southwest—"triple what it was just three years ago".

Mullen declared that the US confronted "a classic insurgency" in Afghanistan that required "a well-coordinated counterinsurgency strategy". He complained that the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) command was "plagued by shortfalls in capability and capacity, and constrained by a host of caveats that limit its ability". Asked if more American troops should be sent, the admiral declared that Iraq was the priority for the overstretched US military. "In Afghanistan, we do what we can. In Iraq, we do what we must. There is a limit to what we can apply to Afghanistan," he said.

"Admittedly, it's gotten worse," Defence Secretary Gates added, blaming inadequate government services and corruption among the Afghan police. He also criticised NATO allies, referring to Germany in particular, for failing to provide enough troops and for placing limitations on those that had been sent. "I am not ready to let NATO off the hook in Afghanistan at this point," he said.

Gates also announced that the Bush administration was pushing for the installation of a European official as a "strong civilian representative", nominally to assist in the coordination of international aid. The mooted choice—British diplomat Paddy Ashdown, who served for three years as international administrator in Bosnia-Herzegovina—makes clear that more than aid coordination is on the agenda. A "strong civilian representative" is being installed to oversee, and if need be override, Karzai's regime, which is obviously regarded in Washington as dysfunctional and ineffective.

Such measures are largely cosmetic, however. As several commentators have pointed out, the anti-occupation insurgency has been steadily rising, fuelled by anger over NATO atrocities, terrible living conditions and lack of opportunities. Commenting to *EurasiaNet.org*, Joanna Nathan, from the International Crisis Group, put the Taliban's resurgence down to the "disillusionment and disenfranchisement" felt by Afghans. "They are feeling left out of government or administration, or they feel that their tribal community is [being left out] and they are not being heard. They

feel they haven't seen the international assistance that was offered."

Writing in the British-based *Times*, Bronwen Maddox warned that time was running out, particularly for British forces in Helmand Province. "While British ministers have described the political and social development of Afghanistan as a 20 or 30 year endeavour, military commanders—notably Lieutenant-General David Richards—have said that the Afghans' patience for any foreign presence will run out if there are not more tangible signs of progress."

Commenting on the Musa Qala operation, Maddox pointed out that the factors driving the offensive highlighted the weaknesses, not the strength, of the US-led occupation. "[Firstly] the blooming health of the opium trade, more exuberant year after year, is more than an embarrassment; it is a measure of the failure of parts of the strategy, as well as a threat to it all. The weakness of the government of President Hamid Karzai is a second; his imperfect support of NATO efforts, his faltering grip on parts of the country, and his desire to talk to those close to the Taliban to try to shore up that support has imparted even more urgency into Western efforts."



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