

Major city in Afghanistan falls to Taliban attack

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Hundreds of Taliban fighters overran Kunduz, the fifth-largest city in Afghanistan, Monday, in a major blow to the Obama administration and its puppet government in Kabul, headed by President Ashraf Ghani.

US warplanes carried out several airstrikes against the city Tuesday, according to military spokesmen in Kabul, but Ghani said there would be no full-scale air attack on the city of 300,000 people because of the likelihood of large-scale civilian casualties. “The government of Afghanistan is an accountable government and cannot bombard inside the cities, and it will not,” he claimed.

Ghani said in a televised address that troops are “retaking government buildings ... and reinforcements, including special forces and commandos are either there or on their way there.” He urged the population not to give in to “fear and terror.”

At the same time, the Afghan president foreshadowed an impending bloodbath by giving the standard Pentagon excuse for inflicting mass casualties, declaring at a news conference, “The problem is that the treacherous enemy is using civilians as a human shield.”

Initial reports on Tuesday indicated a stalemate in the fighting around the airport, but some officials claimed the government forces had recaptured the Kunduz police station and the local prison.

Taliban forces seized control of the city Monday in a carefully coordinated attack that included assaults from four directions as well as an uprising from inside the city by fighters who had infiltrated during several previous nights.

Video posted on Twitter showed Taliban soldiers posing at landmarks in downtown Kunduz, including the local hospital and several government buildings, as

well as the prison. Six hundred prisoners were freed, at least 100 captured Taliban among them, who swelled the force occupying the city.

Afghan government forces numbered some 3,000 men, six times the number of their Taliban attackers. A spokesman for the Interior Ministry told the Associated Press that Kunduz had “collapsed,” and press accounts said that 110 local policemen had simply surrendered as soon as the Taliban entered the city.

Kunduz occupies a critical economic and geographic position. It is the largest city in the richest farming area of Afghanistan, the source of much of the country’s grain supply. It occupies a key crossroads position astride east-west routes from China through Afghanistan to Uzbekistan, and north-south routes from Kabul to Tajikistan.

While Kunduz is separated by hundreds of miles from the main base of the Taliban in the east and south of the country, the city’s capture does not take the insurgent group beyond its base in the Pashtun-speaking population, the largest of Afghanistan’s numerous ethnic groups.

Kunduz represents the only large concentration of Pashtun-speakers in northern Afghanistan, a region otherwise predominantly Tajik and Uzbek speaking. This suggests that there is a danger of a communal bloodbath by government troops against the largely Pashtun population of the city in the event they retake it by force.

Government spokesmen said the city was effectively surrounded by troops on three sides, with the Tajikistan border on the north, setting the stage for bloody street-by-street fighting.

From the political standpoint, the fall of Kunduz is a blow to the US occupation regime. The city is the first to fall to the Taliban since the US-led attack ousted the

regime of Mullah Omar in October-November 2001. The operation was the first by Taliban military forces inside a major Afghan city. All previous attacks over the past 13 years have been by suicide squads of gunmen or bombers.

Taliban forces attacked Kunduz in May and June, but were beaten back by Afghan Army forces backed by local militias that were mobilized in their support. But the insurgents had cemented control of much of the rural area of Kunduz Province, and they remained poised for another strike throughout the summer.

There were recriminations between Kunduz officials and the central government in Kabul over how easily the city was captured Monday, with one Afghan senator demanding the resignation of the government. The governor of Kunduz Province, Omar Safi, was not in the city when the Taliban seized his office Monday, and there were public demands that President Ghani should replace him.

The central government is a shaky coalition between President Ghani, backed by tribal warlords in the Pashtun and Uzbek areas in the east, south and west, and chief executive Abdullah Abdullah, whose political base is among warlords in the Tajik and Hazara areas in the north and center of the country.

The coalition was created by a shotgun wedding enforced by the US government after a presidential campaign in which Ghani and Abdullah were the two top candidates, with each accusing the other of stealing the election. Abdullah, who was representing Afghanistan at the UN General Assembly in New York, announced he was returning home early because of the crisis over Kunduz.

There were recriminations in Washington as well. Mac Thornberry, Republican chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, compared the collapse of Afghan forces to the debacle suffered by another US puppet regime, in Iraq. “The fall of Kunduz to the Taliban is not unlike the fall of Iraqi provinces to ISIL,” he said. “It is a reaffirmation that precipitous withdrawal leaves key allies and territory vulnerable to the very terrorists we’ve fought so long to defeat.”

Senator John McCain, who heads the Senate Armed Services Committee, echoed the comparison, while urging the White House to drop its plans to phase out the US troop presence in Afghanistan by the end of next year. “It is time that President Obama abandon this

dangerous and arbitrary course and adopt a plan for US troop presence based on conditions on the ground,” he said.

Meanwhile, there are suggestions of a broader crisis of the Afghanistan regime. Taliban forces reportedly attacked outposts in Nangahar Province in eastern Afghanistan, and in Baghlan Province, which sits astride the road from Kabul north to Kunduz.

One Afghan expert, Haroun Mir, founder of the Center for Research and Policy Studies in Kabul, told the *Washington Post* that the Taliban would likely hold Kunduz only long enough to plunder it for ammunition, military vehicles and other valuables, before withdrawing. Nonetheless, he said, “The damage is already done... it’s clear what happened in Kunduz can happen anywhere. It can even happen in a city such as Kabul.”

The appalling conditions of life for the vast majority of the population, whether under Taliban or US-backed puppet rule, have found expression in the steady flow of people out of the country. Afghans are second only to Syrians in the numbers of desperate refugees seeking to cross the Mediterranean into Europe.

Among the more affluent layers, able to afford a passport, applications have risen from 1,000 a day last year to more than 5,000 a day this year, according to data from the International Organization for Migration.



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