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Break for the hills

A mass Taliban jail break comes at an unwelcome time

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IT WAS, said the president's spokesman, a "disaster". Some 500 prisoners, mostly Taliban fighters, had escaped in the early hours of April 25th from a prison holding insurgents in southern Afghanistan.

The caper involved an 18-man crew working from outside the prison undetected for five months. They dug a tunnel some 320 metres (1,050 feet) long into the heart of the Kandahar jail. The tunnellers started their work from a compound that housed a construction company. They deftly concealed the excavated soil. They put in metal beams to support the tunnel as it ran under one of the country's main highways, and they installed lighting and ventilation.

As well as flaunting the Taliban's ability to pull off remarkable stunts, the episode also exposed, yet again, the feebleness of Afghan security forces. The Afghan army and police are meant to take over the handling of the country's security from the Western-led international coalition by the end of 2014. The president, Hamid Karzai, joined the chorus of people claiming that the escapees must have got inside help from prison guards. Insurgent infiltration of the security forces is a subject of mounting concern. A series of deadly attacks have taken place, especially against coalition forces, by men in Afghan uniforms. The latest came on April 27th, in Kabul, when an Afghan pilot killed eight American soldiers and a civilian contractor. It is unclear whether the pilot, who was killed, had Taliban sympathies.

Yet others, including one of the Taliban escapees, gainsay the idea that the breakout had inside assistance. Contacted by telephone soon afterwards, the 28-year-old said there was no need to infiltrate the guards. They were, he said, all stoned. He said it was normal for them to get high on marijuana or heroin and then turn in for a good night's sleep. The guards realised only hours later that their charges had escaped. The contrast between Afghan government hopelessness and insurgent craftiness could hardly have been more stark. The Taliban were quick to follow up the escape with an information campaign, putting out a press release in perfect English that crowed about their success.

Coming on the cusp of the summer "fighting season", the timing of the breakout could not be worse for David Petraeus, the American general in charge in Afghanistan (and proposed as the next head of the CIA). He is anxious to press home military gains from a surge of American troops last year into southern Afghanistan. When around 1,000 prisoners escaped from the same prison three years ago (suicide bombers blew a hole in the perimeter wall), the numbers of hardened fighters seeping back into the districts around Kandahar city quickly caused violence to worsen. Only President Barack Obama's troop surge last year turned the tide. The Taliban will struggle to mount the sort of pitched battles they staged after that earlier great escape. Still, an infusion of fighters will boost an insurgency that has lost huge numbers of mid-level commanders in the past year to NATO special forces.

Coalition forces can only press on with their efforts to hunt down insurgent commanders. After the debacle at Kandahar prison, they were at least able to announce that earlier in the month they had succeeded in killing a key al-Qaeda commander, a Saudi Arabian called Abdul Ghani, whom the alliance said was its second-highest target in the country. Still, they will have their work cut out when pitted against the fighters who walked out from under their noses on Monday morning.