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Taliban gain foothold in once-stable Afghan north

Greg Gordon and Kevin G. Hall | McClatchy

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MAZAR-I-SHARIF, Afghanistan — The insurgents' tactics are familiar. Night letters warn village elders to cooperate or face death. Religious "taxes" must be paid, and fiery sermons in mosques attack the Karzai government and international forces.

The locale is startling, however: Afghanistan's northern Balkh province, which in the years after the fall of the Taliban emerged as one of the most stable — and in its urban hub of Mazar-i-Sharif — most prosperous places in Afghanistan.

The Taliban, often working with criminal gangs, have regained a foothold in four of the province's 14 districts, and in recent months they've stepped up their campaign using roadside bomb attacks and other tactics. Earlier this month, three Afghan police officers in one of the restive districts were killed in a drive-by shooting.

The Taliban's growing presence in northern Afghanistan, near the U.S. and NATO supply routes from the north, poses new challenges for the international forces, which until now have had a small contingent of 520 Swedish and Finnish troops to keep watch over Balkh and three other provinces.

In the first 10 months of this year, there have been 82 significant combat incidents in Balkh, more than triple the number in 2008, and the insurgency may be even more potent next year.

"In areas where they are hiding right now, we won't have any control during the winter," said Col. Olof Granander, a commander of Swedish forces in Balkh. "And there is a risk they will try to build up their capacity, and they will be tougher to fight during the upcoming spring and summer."

Northern Afghanistan is dominated by Tajiks, Uzbeks and other ethnic groups that were a mainstay of the mujahedeen forces that fought the communists, and then fended off the Taliban until 1998, when the Islamic extremists captured and held Mazar until the U.S. intervention in 2001.

Decades ago, however, pockets of Pashtuns moved into the region, encouraged by the central government, and many of these Pashtun areas have become focal points for the Taliban's northern insurgency.

Insurgent activity is still far below the levels in the more violent provinces in eastern and southern Afghanistan that are expected to be the focal point of any new U.S. troop deployments, but some analysts say the north shouldn't be overlooked.

If the international community reinforces the Afghan police and military there, "the insurgents could be stopped relatively easily. This will not be the case in one or two years if the insurgency is allowed to grow," wrote Gilles Dorronsoro in a report for The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Some of the biggest Taliban gains have been in northern Kunduz province, where insurgents set up shadow governments in at least one district. Earlier this month, some 750 Afghan and international forces launched an operation that reportedly killed more than 100 insurgents, including eight commanders, according to NATO officials.

Across the country, in northwestern Faryab province, the Taliban have moved heavily into one district that's predominately Pashtun, according to Army Capt. Samuel Weeks, who commands a company of U.S. soldiers based in the province's capital city. Just before the Aug. 20 election, mortar attacks in the Faryab district killed seven Afghan police officers.

Weeks said that earlier this year he got a phone call from the Taliban after they captured a U.S. surveillance drone. They wanted to sell it back to the Army, an offer he quickly rejected because the drone had no intelligence value and he wasn't about to help fund the insurgency.

Weeks said the Taliban tend to stay in the western Faryab district, where they have the most support, and their numbers appear to be growing.

"They get pushed out of other areas, and come here," said Weeks, 34, of Thomaston, Ga.

In Balkh, the Taliban work with smugglers who in the absence of government control have developed weapons smuggling routes, according to Western officials.

Many of the Taliban appear to be local residents who were refugees in Pakistan and have returned to rural districts with substantial Pashtun populations, according to Granander. These rural districts haven't shared in much of the economic growth that's revived the Balkh's urban center of Mazar-i-Sharif, a hub of trade and agriculture.

In an effort to spruce up the city, Gov. Mohammad Atta Noor even had European-style traffic circles built that feature statues and neon lights.

Atta is a former mujahedeen fighter against the Russians — and later the Taliban — whom Karzai appointed in 2004. Since then, Atta has emerged as an outspoken critic of Karzai's government. He says the Taliban gains have occurred as the central government failed to follow through with development efforts in the past several years.

"The central government has neglected northern Afghanistan, and that is why there is insecurity," Atta told McClatchy in an interview. "The people here felt neglected, and that's why the enemy of Afghanistan, they came here and started problems."

NATO officials said that Atta has been a strong partner in the fight against the Taliban but he has limited control over the police and army. He faces an uncertain political future, and the tension between him and Karzai has added another layer of volatility to Balkh province, with fears that the dispute eventually could trigger violence.

In the summer presidential campaign, Atta openly backed Karzai's challenger, Abdullah Abdullah, an ally against the Taliban from 1996 to 2001. All over Mazar-i-Sharif, posters left over from the election feature photos of Atta and Abdullah.

An oil portrait of Karzai still hangs on the wall in Atta's cavernous, ornate office, but Atta said that the election that recently made Karzai president for another five years included hundreds of thousands of fraudulent votes for the incumbent.

"This is not a legitimate decision to announce Karzai as the legitimate president of Afghanistan," Atta said.

Asked if he personally recognizes Karzai as president, Atta sighed and paused. He said his future support for Karzai depends what changes Karzai makes in his government, such as removing the minister of interior, whom Atta thinks has been a failure.

"Right now, Afghanistan is in a crisis of legitimacy," Atta said. "We will see what changes are made in the government, and based on that we will make our decision."

There have been reports that some Northern Alliance veterans are rearming themselves in case they have to fight Karzai, but the Swedish military couldn't confirm them, said Granander. Atta said that he wouldn't support violence, but that he doesn't control everything that happens in the north.

Granander said that in some Balkh communities, villagers are banding together to resist the Taliban efforts to impose taxes, but the Taliban have been threatening to kill those who refuse to comply with their edicts or who cooperate with Afghan and NATO security forces. Those threats have prompted many villagers to cooperate reluctantly with the Taliban.