

## Villagers Take On Taliban in Their Heartland

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PISHIN GAN SAYEDAN, Afghanistan — An uprising against the Taliban that began last month in this southern Afghan village has now spread through dozens of others, according to residents and Afghan and American officials, in the most significant popular turning against the Islamist insurgents in recent years.

Since early February, when villagers joined with police forces to begin ousting Taliban fighters from this region of rich vineyards and orchards southwest of Kandahar City, hundreds of residents have rallied to support the government. Nearly 100 village elders vowed at a public meeting Monday to keep the Taliban out as the new fighting season sets in, and Afghan flags are flying from rooftops in the villages, residents said.

Isolated uprisings against the Taliban have been reported in several different parts of Afghanistan over the past 18 months. But the revolt in Panjwai is considered significant because it is the first in southern Afghanistan, in the spiritual heartland of the Taliban movement, where the group's influence had endured despite repeated operations by American and NATO forces.

Though no one is claiming that the Taliban are forever out of the fight even in this district — the insurgents have vowed a vengeful return and in the past week killed two men in the area — the Panjwai uprising has given an example of what can be accomplished when local resentment over bullying by militants is accompanied by reliable government support.

It has been good news in an often-pessimistic season, as the Taliban have appeared to make inroads in some other places around the country where American troops are pulling out.

In interviews, villagers and local officials said that although the uprising grew out of villagers' anger at Taliban brutality, it gelled because of the growing strength of the Afghan security forces and a particularly active police force in the region. The new Panjwai police chief, Sultan Mohammad, is from Zangabad, the name of the surrounding area, and his appointment in January galvanized local support for the government.

"It's been a long time coming. But in short, the people have said enough is enough, and they became fed up with the Taliban," Maj. Gen. Robert B. Abrams, the American commander in the south, said in a news briefing with Pentagon reporters last week. He said the Taliban had been ousted from all but four villages in the district at that point.

American and Afghan forces have fought a grueling campaign in the districts of Kandahar since the surge of 2010 when thousands of extra American troops were sent into southern Afghanistan.

Although the Taliban were routed in crucial areas that year, they maintained a grip in the southern part of Panjwai, in the village clusters of Zangabad and Sperwan, and threaded the area with improvised explosive devices and ambush sites.

Though the surge of Western troops, and the increase in Afghan security forces that followed, has brought greater security for much of Kandahar Province, in some areas it also brought increased tensions with locals, and even greater violence in some pockets.

Indeed, one of the worst atrocities of the war occurred just a few hundred yards from this village when 16 Afghan civilians were killed in their homes last year. An American soldier, Staff Sgt. Robert Bales, has been accused of killing the civilians in a nighttime rampage, raising local anger against the government and American forces in the region.

Yet it was the Taliban's callousness that caused the population to snap, Afghan officials and the villagers here said. Between 300 and 400 civilians have been killed or injured by bombs or ambushes by the Taliban in the past six months in Panjwai, according to the district governor, Hajji Fazel Mohammad.

"People are angry because the Taliban have been laying mines in their orchards and vineyards," he said in an interview at his district office. A member of the Taliban would lay mines and then get killed and no one knew where the mines were, he said. "People are now fed up with the Taliban and are joining us."

The spark came in early February when the Taliban commander of the area, Mullah Noor Mahmud, 35, came to arrest men in this village. He called on the house of Hajji Abdul Wudood and demanded the handover of two sons he accused of spying for the government.

"They wanted to slaughter my sons," Mr. Wudood said in an interview last month in his home. "They wanted to take them to the desert where they had a court and a base."

Mr. Wudood, a 60-year-old former mujahedeen fighter against the Soviets in the 1980s, had had enough. He and his eight grown sons decided to make a stand.

Several villagers who had lost relatives to the Taliban joined them. The village had already been starting to boil: Three days earlier the same Taliban commander had beaten up farmers who were clearing undergrowth from the village irrigation canal.

Mr. Wudood turned for help to the district police chief, Mr. Mohammad, an old mujahedeen associate and a relative by marriage. Together they hatched a plan to ambush the Taliban.

On Feb. 6, they moved against a Taliban base in a nearby village. Seventy unarmed villagers accompanied the police, guiding them through the minefields and acting as lookouts. After a short firefight, the police routed the Taliban, killing three men, and chasing the remainder south toward the desert.

Army and police units pursued the Taliban down to their base on the edge of the desert in the days after. As the word spread, dozens of villages showed their support for the government and offered men for the Afghan Local Police forces to guard their villages.

General Abrams says the local support and expansion of government forces — he still commands 17,000 troops in the region, and Afghan fighters now amount to 52,000 across various agencies — has coincided with a period of weakness for the Taliban here, financially in particular. "They lack the money, they lack the arms and ammunition, and they are having a challenge gathering their forces," he said, speaking by telephone from his headquarters at Kandahar airfield on Tuesday.

The head of Afghanistan's National Security Directorate, Asadullah Khalid, a bitter enemy of the Taliban who is still recovering in the United States from a suicide attack against him in Kabul last year, said he had been trying to nurture popular uprisings as a way to beat the Taliban.

"One thing for sure is that the people are tired of the Taliban and they don't want the Taliban," he said in an interview. "And when the people don't want the Taliban, the Taliban cannot come in. I feel this is the beginning of the end of the Taliban, but the question is how can we use this."

Provincial and local leaders in Kandahar express pride at the uprising's success so far, but they warn that if the government does not follow through with increased police support, the Taliban could undermine it all. "It all depends on what the government does with these people," said Hajji Agha Lalai, a member of Kandahar's provincial council. "If they support them and equip them, it will be a revolution."

Taliban leaders were furious at losing Panjwai and have been plotting their return to the district in meetings in the Pakistani town of Quetta this week, police and intelligence officials said. One Taliban commander, who spoke on the condition of anonymity during a telephone interview, acknowledged the loss of Panjwai, but said the movement was starting to infiltrate more fighters into southern Afghanistan along with workers coming in for the opium poppy harvest.

Last weekend, two workers from a construction firm were kidnapped and killed in Panjwai. Their bodies were found hanging in different villages near the desert where Taliban fighters still have a presence, police officials said.

Mr. Wudood said he had received warnings that the Taliban had ordered his assassination. Yet he remained defiant.

“This time it is not only me,” he said. “There are thousands of us in Zangabad and in Sperwan. They cannot eliminate us all. We are the true owners of this land and the men who are attacking us are coming from outside, and we are not scared. We will defend our land.”

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