

Facing The Taliban Threat In The Coming Months

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NATO forces in Afghanistan are preparing for an anticipated spring offensive by the Taliban. On February 2, hundreds of Taliban fighters attacked and seized the town of Musa Qala in a remote district of Helmand Province. The battle has been closely monitored by Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani journalist and author of the book "Taliban." RFE/RL correspondent Ron Synovitz spoke to Rashid today about the events at Musa Qala and what fighting there suggests about Taliban tactics in the months ahead.

RFE/RL: The thaw at the end of the winter already has begun in southern Afghanistan. Does this mean that a Taliban spring offensive is imminent? "The construction of new Afghan National Army divisions is going to be [accelerated]. They want to try to complete the 70,000 figure by the end of 2008 rather than in 2010, as was originally planned."

Ahmed Rashid: There are two parts of an offensive going on right now. One is the battle for control of the area around the Kajaki Dam, which the Dutch and the British are trying to clear so that the rebuilding of the dam and the power network of the dam can start. The Taliban are not letting up on that. And the second part [of the Taliban offensive] is the retaking of this town -- Musa Qala.

RFE/RL: Do you consider the Taliban's seizure of Musa Qala in Helmand Province -- and their continued hold on administrative buildings there -- as the beginning of this year's Taliban spring offensive?

Rashid: We still have to see whether the Taliban are going to defend it, whether they are going to reinforce it, in fact, with more Taliban troops coming in. But certainly, there has been no letup in the war through the winter. We've seen a spate of suicide bombings. And I think the danger is that a major NATO attack on Musa Qala could prompt a Taliban reaction in other provinces in the south -- which could lead to an early spring offensive.

RFE/RL: The organizer of last week's attack on Musa Qala -- a Taliban commander named Abdul Ghafour who was killed by a NATO air strike on February 4 -- appears to have been at least partially motivated by the killing of his brother by an earlier NATO air strike. Does this suggest that the seizure of Musa Qala may have been carried out by a Taliban commander who was more interested in revenge than any coordinated Taliban campaign? What does this tell us about the kind of fight that the Taliban is likely to wage in the months ahead?

Rashid: It certainly does play a role. [Abdul Ghafour's] brother was killed and he did react to his brother's death. But at the same time, I think the fact that he mobilized 200 or 300 Taliban to retake the town -- scuttling the peace accord which had been in place with the British troops for about three or four months -- I think is very significant. And clearly, I don't think he would have done this without some kind of authority from the higher Taliban leadership -- from the Taliban Shura and Mullah Omar. What we have to see is whether the Taliban force in Musa Qala is going to be reinforced [with more Taliban.] If it is, then we will be seeing wider attacks by the Taliban [across other parts of Afghanistan in the months ahead.]

RFE/RL: Why do you think the Taliban have been able this year to continue with offensive operations during the winter months when the weather has hampered their activities in previous years?

Rashid: The Taliban have been very well equipped this winter for cold weather. Some of the Taliban that have been killed in the last six to eight weeks have got very good boots, fleece jackets, warm trousers. They seem to have been very well equipped for possible fighting -- even winter fighting. There is little doubt that much of the logistics of the Taliban comes from Pakistan.

RFE/RL: What are NATO's strategic concerns about Taliban tactics in the spring and summer of 2007?

Rashid: The Taliban last year fought positional warfare -- trying to hold ground, hold territory -- in three provinces. Oruzgan, Helmand, and Kandahar. The danger this year is that they may try to launch heavy guerrilla attacks with perhaps 200 men at a time, not just in three provinces but perhaps in six or seven provinces, even in western Afghanistan. If they do that, NATO is going to be very stretched because there are a very limited number of troops and there are only a certain number who will actually fight. They will defend themselves, but [troops from countries like Spain and Italy, for example,] will not go on the offensive. That restricts NATO's maneuverability and ability to counter a widespread Taliban offensive.

RFE/RL: The buildup of the forces of the Afghan National Army is a key part of the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. It is seen as a way of allowing the Afghan central government to exert its authority in provincial regions and, eventually, to allow for the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan. But there have been problems that have slowed the process of building up the Afghan army. The force now reportedly numbers about 40,000 troops with a target of expanding it to 70,000. How do you see this build up progressing in the months and years ahead?

Rashid: Much of the recent money given by the Americans -- about \$10 billion for the next two years -- is going to go to the Afghan National Army. The construction of new Afghan National Army divisions is going to be [accelerated]. They want to try to complete the 70,000 figure by the end of 2008 rather than in 2010, as was originally planned. But the biggest shortfall is in equipment. The Afghan National Army is entirely dependent on the Americans for transport, for helicopters, for evacuation, for everything. What some of this American money is going to do, I think, is to try and equip the Afghan National Army much better so that it does become a more self-contained force.

At the same time, we should remember that there [are] something like 600 Americans embedded with the Afghan National Army at the moment. If the Afghan army expands rapidly in the next two years, there is going to be an even larger number of Americans embedded with it.

RFE/RL: In the past week, the command of NATO forces in Afghanistan has been passed from British General David Richards to U.S. General Dan McNeill. How do you expect General McNeill's appointment to impact NATO's campaign in Afghanistan?

Rashid: I know General McNeill. He is a very thoughtful person. He is a very strategically minded person. He doesn't minimize the issues of development and reconstruction. And we should remember that he is the man who started the PRTs -- the Provincial Reconstruction Teams -- back in 2002, which was a way to expand ISAF outside of Kabul when McNeill did not have the necessary troops to do it. Personally, I think, he will be very careful.

RFE/RL: How does General McNeill's perspective about the challenges in Afghanistan differ from his predecessor, General Richards?

Rashid: General Richards had tried very hard to create a separate identity for NATO from the American forces. The kind of image of the Americans kicking down doors was something he wanted to avoid. And he wanted to create a softer, more pro-development image for NATO. We have to see whether McNeill is going to be able to maintain this given the American attitudes to warfare -- which are quite different from the European concepts.

RFE/RL: So will the fact that General McNeill is an American have any impact?

Rashid: The issue is what the American leadership of NATO forces [in Afghanistan] is going to do to other European countries. We have a series of problems in many European countries -- opposition parties wanting to pull out their troops, opposition parties demanding that European governments don't provide more troops. The danger is that with an American commander, more and more, the NATO force will not be seen as a kind of multinational, pan-European American force. But it will be seen under American leadership as a much more Americanized force. And I think that impact is going to be negative for the Afghans also.