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Taliban Exploit Openings in Neglected Province

By ALISSA J. RUBIN

PUL-I-KUMRI, Afghanistan — Almost unnoticed, this strategic northern province is slipping away from government control.

Baghlan Province contains two of the crucial north-south routes in [Afghanistan](#). As night falls on this provincial capital, the city turns dark and silent. The [Taliban](#) have decreed that the cellphone signals go down at night so the main cellphone companies switch off the signals from dusk to dawn.

Men with guns and rocket-propelled grenade launchers guard illegal checkpoints just north of the capital, waiting for convoys of trucks or other lucrative prey. Shootings erupt almost every day across the province.

Deprived of jobs and local government services, people here are turning to Taliban courts for speedy justice and drifting toward those who will pay them — either local strongmen or the Taliban.

“The situation of Baghlan is very serious, and day by day it is getting worse and worse,” said Mohammed Rasool Mohsini, the chairman of the provincial council and a former commander.

Even 15 months ago Baghlan was not like this. It had a few trouble spots, according to Afghans and Americans working on development projects, but for the most part it seemed safe.

Afghan politicians, local leaders and local citizens all said they felt that the Afghan government, coalition forces and development groups had focused so intensively on the south, funneling tens of thousands of troops and billions of dollars to communities there, that they had missed the danger signs.

“Even two years ago the Taliban had a very small influence in Baghlan and we were telling the government, ‘If you don’t deal with their small activities, they will grow,’ ” Mr. Mohsini said.

There are no major **NATO** bases in Baghlan. The nearest is in Kunduz, and until recently it was manned exclusively by the Germans who focused on turbulence in that province. Now the **United States Army's** 10th Mountain Division has arrived with some 3,000 troops and begun operations in Baghlan, but so far they have brought only temporary quiet.

Insurgents have resurfaced elsewhere in the province, said Alyson McFarland, the only American civilian working with the development team in Pul-i-Kumri.

Last week a group of at least 80 Taliban fighters briefly took over the main bazaar in another of the unstable districts, Dahana-i-Ghori, engaging in gun battles for several hours. Although the police ultimately forced the Taliban to retreat, eight officers were killed after firing their weapons until they ran out of ammunition, said Gen. Abdul Rahman Rahimi, the provincial police chief.

Since then, the Taliban have blocked most roads to the district and attacked any government or development workers who have tried to pass, local elders said. The police have returned but are all but confined to a 500-yard area around the district center, said Obidullah Khan, an Uzbek tribal elder in Dahana-i-Ghori.

A corrupt judiciary and the lack of government services have made it easy for the Taliban to gain a foothold in rural areas. At least the Taliban judicial system is swift and free of bribes, said Nuria Hamidi, a provincial council member. "They are solving issues quicker than the government, and people in the bazaar say, 'I had this problem or that problem and the Taliban solved it,' " she said.

The Taliban have also been able to exploit ethnic differences, suggesting that the Tajik-dominated local government does not care for the Pashtuns here.

Indeed, underlying the drift toward chaos is a fractured society where cracks have been papered over and have never fully healed. Baghlan, like many other areas of the north, has long been a political and ethnic crossroads of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras. They made up the **Northern Alliance** that fought the Taliban, whose ranks are dominated by Pashtuns.

The three allied ethnic groups live uneasily alongside the minority ethnic Pashtuns, who feel abandoned by the central government, which has allowed local security forces to be dominated by non-Pashtuns. The lack of development is another common complaint. "A lot of developmental progress is in the south, even though they are killing and fighting," said Mohammad Khalil Anwari, another provincial council member.

There is little electricity, and rutted roads are common even in the cities. Resentments were

fueled when a group of investors that included one of President [Hamid Karzai's](#) brothers, Mahmoud Karzai, bought a local cement factory, then cut many of its jobs and paid those who remained lower salaries, according to provincial council members.

Baghlan's governor, Munshi Abdul Majid, himself a Pashtun, did not deny the problems and also seemed frustrated by neglect from Kabul, urging the central government to confer with him and local officials about security.

A group of Pashtun elders who had gathered at the home of a local senator last weekend discussed the province's security problems as they sat in a traditional open-air tent, eating green melon in the heat of the afternoon. The Taliban began to encroach several months ago, and now the elders find themselves accused of being Taliban by the police, many of whom are Tajiks, even though most people who live in the area oppose the Taliban.

"Is the president a Pashtun?" said Sarwar, a former commander who like many Afghans uses only one name. "Before he came to power no one had done such cruel things to us. Since he came, he has been killing Pashtuns from Helmand to here."

In another troubled Baghlan district, the only protection other than a few police officers is a local armed group of 100 to 120 men, known as an arbeki and set up by the National Directorate of Security. They seem to operate without any government control or supervision other than that of their local commanders. They are a nightmarish reminder of the early 1990s when strongmen with guns made people follow their orders.

"To be honest, the people prefer the Taliban," said Mr. Khan, the tribal elder. "These arbeki men are cruel, violent, taking everything by force from the shopkeepers. They are walking in the bazaar with their rifles, extorting the drivers and traders."

General Rahimi, the police commander, would not discuss the arbekis but made it clear that he was opposed to President Karzai's proposal for creating a new local police force in a number of troubled districts that would help the police defend their areas. "The only way to bring peace and security is to equip the national army and national police and increase the number of our trained troops and give us more, better weapons," he said.

Nonetheless, the Baghlanis are deeply loyal to their area.

"My hopes are still very high," said Mohammed Wakhil, 20, who is studying to be a nurse and looks after his family's small storefront, where they sell plastic flowers and ornaments for wedding celebrations.

"I want to see our city become more beautiful than Paris," Mr. Wakhil said.

“We need unity in this place; if we can all unite, then. ...” he added before his voice trailed off.