



VIOLENCE INCREASES IN AFGHANISTAN FIVE YEARS LATER

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U.S. troops, which first entered Afghanistan a month following the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, are facing increased violence at the hands of Taliban forces that continue to prevent economic and social reconstruction of the Central Asian nation five years later.

Over the weekend, the governor of a province in Afghanistan became the highest-ranking official to be killed by the Taliban since the rebel fighters began a suicide bombing campaign last year.

The bomber walked up to Hakim Taniwal's unarmed car and detonated his explosives, killing the governor as well as two staff members.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai, a close friend of the assassinated man, said the rebels will not succeed.

"The enemies of Afghanistan are trying to kill those people who are working for the peace and prosperity of Afghanistan. The enemies of Afghanistan must understand that we have millions of people like Mr. Taniwal who will continue to serve this great nation," Karzai said in a statement.

Last week, at least 16 people, including two American soldiers, died in a suicide blast, 50 yards from the U.S. Embassy.

The death toll of American, NATO and coalition forces is 149, making 2006 the deadliest year yet in nearly five years of conflict.

Immediately after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the totals were about a third as high.

Role of NATO

Alarmed by the deteriorating situation, NATO commanders have called for an increase to the 20,000-member NATO force that has controlled 19 of the country's 34 provinces since the handover from U.S. and other coalition forces began in late 2004.

NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, was created in 1949 to contain the spread of Communism across Europe.

This was the group's first mission outside of the Euro-Atlantic region, although troops are now serving in Iraq and Africa.

The Pakistan border

The surge in Taliban fighting is focused in the south of the country, near the border with Pakistan. U.S. forces are in this mountainous region searching for Osama bin Laden, the mastermind behind the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

The area is home to many who support the Taliban and bin Laden. Local villages are said to shelter Taliban fighters who re-enter the country from Pakistan after resting there.

Although Pakistan, a U.S. ally in the war on terror, and has said it will work to improve the border, those on the ground say the situation is dire.

"I have had a soldier tell me: 'You know what? The Pakistani border is just an imaginary line keeping us from doing our job,'" said Sarah Chayes, a former NPR reporter who moved to Afghanistan in 2002 to run a cooperative that sells locally made products.

Opium crop

The south of the country also is where the majority of the country's illegal opium is grown. Opium is made out of flowers that are processed into highly addictive drugs such as heroin.

Afghanistan provides more than 90 percent of the world's opium harvest. This year's crop has increased by more than 60 percent, a new record, according to a United Nations report.

Although farmers may want to grow other crops, such as pomegranates, almonds or apricots, there is no system in place to get them to international markets where people will pay more for them, according to Chayes.

"Imagine a place where there's no banking system. So, no one can take out a loan from a -- from an institution. They take out a loan from a -- from a [drug] trafficker. And they have to pay it back in opium. So, that's some of the ways that it -- that it really disturbs, you know, regular economic transactions," Chayes said.

Daily life in Afghanistan

A slow economy and high levels of unemployment also impact the lack of security in the country.

Forty-percent of the country is unemployed, Ali Jalali, former interior minister of Afghanistan, told the NewsHour with Jim Lehrer in May.

In addition, Afghans "have no more electricity than they did when the U.S. came in," Barnett Rubin of New York University told the NewsHour.

"They are frustrated with the slow pace of development," he said at the time. "They had high expectations in 2002 after the downfall of the Taliban."

-- *Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra*

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