

## Freed Taliban infiltrate rural areas

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KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN — About 400 Taliban militants freed during a spectacular prison break in Kandahar have flooded into nearby restive rural areas patrolled by Canadian troops, and even as far east as Pakistan, according to a senior insurgent commander.

The 40-year-old Taliban leader told The Globe and Mail by telephone Sunday that a small fleet of motorbikes and cars was waiting for the prisoners Friday after about 30 insurgents used suicide attacks, rocket-propelled grenades and guns to break into the Sarpoza Provincial Prison about 9:30 p.m. after blowing open the front gates.

Most of the Taliban prisoners were first taken to villages in the turbulent Panjwai district and given money, the commander said. From there they scattered in different directions, including nearby Helmand province, Kabul and Pakistan. "Many of them have gone to their homes."

Locals living in the Panjwai district, a rural area west of Kandahar that Canadian troops have fought hard to keep out of insurgent hands, confirmed seeing numerous former Taliban prisoners in their villages.



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Afghan President Hamid Karzai after a news conference in Kabul Sunday. Mr. Karzai threatened to send troops into neighbouring Pakistan to kill Taliban militants if they continue cross-border attacks into Afghanistan. (REUTERS/Ahmad Masood)

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"On Saturday morning, when we came out from our houses, we saw several Taliban ... they were very happy, smiling and laughing," said a 33-year-old taxi driver from Talukan, a village about 45 kilometres southwest of Kandahar. The man, who didn't want to be identified, said he knew of at least four men who were injured in the escape. He said they received medical treatment in the village.

The brazen prison break is a significant victory for the Taliban and has raised serious questions about the Afghan and NATO security effort in southern Afghanistan, a hotbed of insurgency activity.

Before Canadian troops could arrive to secure the area on Friday, the bulk of the prison population, about 1,100 people in total, was already gone. In addition to the 400 Taliban suspects in the prison, about 600 common criminals escaped.

Canada's top soldier in Afghanistan said that within minutes of the prison attack, NATO had surveillance units in the sky scanning the area for fugitives.

The jail is about 30 kilometres from the main international base at Kandahar airfield, and once Canadian soldiers became aware of the seriousness of the attack, they arrived at the prison within 40 minutes, Brigadier-General Denis Thompson told reporters.

But the inmates were long gone by then. "They escaped the prison very fast — within a few minutes," Kandahar Police Chief Syed Aqa Saqib said.

President Hamid Karzai threatened Sunday to send Afghan troops into Pakistan to combat high-level Taliban militants, including Taliban supreme leader Mullah Mohammed Omar and Baitullah Mehsud, a Pakistani warlord aligned with the Taliban.

"[If they] come and kill Afghans and kill coalition troops, it exactly gives us the right to do the same," Mr. Karzai said. "Baitullah Mehsud should know that we will go after him now and hit him in his house. And the other fellow, Mullah Omar of Pakistan, should know the same."

While Mr. Karzai has long asked for international and Pakistani forces to target Taliban insurgents in Pakistan, this is the first time the frustrated leader has said Afghanistan might go in on its own.

In Pakistan, Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani said the Afghan-Pakistan border would be too difficult to protect even if Pakistan put its entire army there.

"Neither do we interfere in anyone else's matters, nor will we allow anyone to interfere in our territorial limits and our affairs," Mr. Gilani said. "We want a stable Afghanistan. It is in our interest."

General Rick Hillier, the outgoing Canadian Chief of the Defence Staff, has acknowledged that Friday's assault on Sarpoza was a setback, but added it will not likely raise the threat level because Afghanistan is already a dangerous mission for Canada's 2,500 troops.

Kandahar residents are still reeling from the bold attack on the prison, Kandahar province's largest, with many people staying off the streets and several shops remaining closed.

In recent months, Afghanistan's second largest city, despite being the spiritual birthplace of the Taliban, had become more secure and the number of violent incidents had dropped.

Speculation is rampant in the city that the insurgents must have had help from either Afghan police or prison guards in pulling off the breakout. At the time of the assault, the jail was being guarded by about 30 Afghans, almost half of whom were killed on Friday. Prison officials have already been questioned by government authorities about the attack.

"Lots of people think this was an inside job," said Rangina Hamidi, a 31-year-old Kandahar resident and prominent women's activist.

Her family fled Afghanistan in 1981. She grew up in the United States, but returned to Kandahar in 2003. Now, in light of Friday's attack, Ms. Hamidi is not sure if she'll stay much longer.

She was visiting relatives who live near Sarpoza when the fighting broke out at the prison. "This is the closest I've been to a war zone," she said in an interview. "I literally saw bullets fly over my head. I'm scared for the first time since I've been here."

Ms. Hamidi wants to see more international coalition forces on the streets of Kandahar.

"Friday was a major setback. The way things are going, I don't think it will get any better."

Peter MacKay, Canada's Defence Minister, told CTV's *Question Period* Sunday that "we have to call for calm at this time and that means speaking with President Karzai as well as officials inside Pakistan."

Mr. MacKay said Ottawa has always been "very frank about the need for ... the co-operation of the surrounding countries, most notably Pakistan."

"The Pakistan government is very aware, particularly in the south, of the insurgency that is coming from their country into Afghanistan and that has to be addressed," he added.

*With reports from The Canadian Press, Associated Press and Steven Chase in Ottawa*

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