

In the south, tenacious Taliban fights on

By **Drew Brown**, Stars and Stripes

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NAKHONAY, Afghanistan — When the Taliban fled at the start of a weeklong operation by Canadian and Afghan troops here in early October, they left behind at least two major caches of weapons, ammunition, bomb-making materials and medical supplies. They were hidden among the mud-walled compounds and sun-baked grape fields of this isolated farming hamlet in eastern Panjwayi district.

The Canadians and Afghans seized the materials. The Canadians blew up the explosives and munitions that could be used to manufacture roadside bombs. The Afghans kept the serviceable weapons and medical supplies for themselves.

Two days after the operation ended, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force issued a press release that described the operation as a successful disruption of the Taliban's leadership and its supply lines in the area. Nakhonay lies about 12 kilometers southwest of Kandahar city, the provincial capital.

"There are few places where the Taliban can rest and reconstitute their forces," the release quoted Gen. Abdul Qayum, security chief for Kandahar province, as saying, "because we can find and disrupt them — anywhere, anytime."



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Shell casings fly wildly through the air as Warrant Officer Mike Saunders, Sgt. Luc Piquette and Cpl. Kevin Foster exchange fire with Taliban gunmen during a recent firefight in Zhari district, in Afghanistan's Kandahar province. Canadian soldiers and Afghan troops are fighting daily skirmishes with the Taliban for control of Zhari district, which sit in the heartland of the Taliban insurgency.



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Cpl. Kevin Foster, a Canadian soldier on a team advising Afghan troops in Zhari district, runs for cover during a recent firefight in the village of Pashmul. Taliban fighters rarely fight pitched battles against ISAF troops, but frequently ambush small units with small arms fire and roadside bombs.

What the press release did not mention was that the troops were also struck by two roadside bombs as they were moving back to their base on the last day of the mission. A Canadian Leopard tank and a mine-clearing vehicle were damaged.

There were no casualties. Troops fired on the triggerman's suspected location, but a search of the area found no evidence that any enemy fighters had been killed.

The operation, one of dozens that ISAF and Afghan forces carry out every week in southern Afghanistan, was a telling example of how the counterinsurgency war is being fought in the south — and how the Taliban are fighting back.

While the operation demonstrated just how easily ISAF and Afghan troops can attack Taliban sanctuaries "anywhere, anytime," and with overwhelming force, the bombs that hit the troops on their way back to base underscores just how easily the Taliban can also strike back, with relatively little risk.

The bomb strikes also illustrate a fundamental point about the Taliban's tactics in southern Afghanistan: Sustained combat with ISAF and Afghan government troops is relatively rare, but roadside bombs, rocket attacks and sporadic firefights continue to take a steady toll.

Of the approximately 75 soldiers that ISAF has reported killed by hostile fire in southern Afghanistan this year, three-fourths of those were killed by either roadside bombs, rocket attacks and other types of explosions. In Kandahar province, where Canada has about 2,500 troops and the lead role for security, 14 of the 23 Canadian troops killed so far this year



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Soldiers with November Company, 3rd Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment, patrol the village of Nakhonay during a recent operation in Kandahar province.



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Afghan soldiers patrol with Canadian forces during a recent operation in Zhari district. ISAF strategy in southern Afghanistan hinges on the NATO-led coalition's ability to train Afghan forces well enough that they can one day fight the Taliban on their own.



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A group of children watch with amused interest as Canadian and Afghan troops pass through the village of Nakhonay during a recent operation. Many villagers in the south tell ISAF troops they don't support the Taliban, but still fear them greatly, and most seem to be waiting on the sidelines for now waiting to see who wins the battle for control of southern Afghanistan.

were killed by roadside bombs or rocket attacks.

The Taliban are also turning up the heat in attacking Afghan government forces and officials.

In June, a Taliban attack on Sarposa prison in Kandahar freed an estimated 350 jailed fighters; two suicide bombers struck a police headquarters in the city in early September; gunmen on motorcycles assassinated Kandahar's top female police officer later that month; and on Oct. 14, two more motorcycle gunmen assassinated the province's director of social services.

As Ramadan wound to a close last month, insurgents also stepped up rocket attacks at the ISAF base at Kandahar airport, but the attacks have caused no deaths and little damage.

A slew of reports in recent months by both official agencies and nongovernmental groups have pointed to the insurgency as the primary reason behind the rising tide of violence in Afghanistan. However, military officers in southern Afghanistan say part of the reason is that their forces are going after the Taliban more aggressively.

"Certainly, it's no secret that throughout Afghanistan it's been a busy summer, a tough summer in some areas," said Col. Jamie Cade, commander of the Canadian-led Task Force Kandahar. "But at the same time, while it's been a violent summer, a lot of it has been because we the coalition forces and Afghan national security forces are expanding our presence. We're going into areas where the Taliban used to have complete freedom of movement."

Violence across Afghanistan has skyrocketed in the past two years. The United Nations reported last month that security incidents reached 983 in August, the highest level since the fall of the Taliban and a 44 percent increase over the same period last year.

Much of the insurgent violence has been in the south, which is the heartland of the Taliban insurgency. In Helmand province, west of Kandahar, there were nearly 2,500 insurgent attacks between January 2007 and March of this year, the Pentagon reported in June.

The British have about 8,000 troops in Helmand, which accounts for more than half of the country's opium production.

In early October, more than 100 Taliban were reportedly killed after insurgents tried to overrun the British headquarters in Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital. On Oct. 15, about 70 Taliban fighters were reported killed in an overnight airstrike.

ISAF has resorted to sending soldiers into areas that previously had no foreign presence. This past May, about 2,500 U.S. Marines were deployed to Garmsir district in southern Helmand, which had been under Taliban control for years.

In more than a month of combat, the Marines reportedly killed about 400 Taliban, at a loss of only three of their own. The area was turned over to British and Afghan troops last month, and the Marines are currently redeploying to Camp Lejeune, N.C.

In August, soldiers from the U.S. Army's 2nd Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment moved into Maiwand district in western Kandahar province, where Canadian troops lacked the forces to maintain a substantial presence. Maiwand has been identified as an important logistics hub for Taliban fighters moving between Helmand and Kandahar.

ISAF's strategy in southern Afghanistan is to build and train Afghan army to the point where they can take over the fight against the Taliban on their own.

The Taliban's strategy is based upon the premise that they can eventually wear down and outlast ISAF and Afghan government forces.

"In other words, not losing is winning," the Pentagon said in its latest security report published in June.

In villages across southern Afghanistan, it is evident that the Taliban exert control based on fear and reprisals for anyone who might cooperate with Afghan government forces or ISAF troops.

During a recent series of Canadian patrols in the Zhari district of Kandahar province, some villagers spoke darkly of Taliban spies in their midst. Several told troops that while they appreciated their presence, they also feared a Taliban backlash.

"Now it is safe, but if you come too many times, then the Taliban will come and make war on this village," one elder in the village of Haji Makhadem told Lt. Jeff Lloyd of November Company, 3rd Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment.

Afterward, Lloyd expressed sympathy for the elder's predicament, and he hinted at the enormity of the challenge facing him and other troops.

"It's interesting," he said. "But what do you say, as a 24-year-old, to a man who's been through the Russians and who's now been through us?"