
Still in the fight

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EVEN NATO officials gave grudging respect to the audacity of the Taliban raid that sprang the entire population of the main prison in the southern city of Kandahar on the night of June 13th. But the ensuing speculation that the Taliban may be about to take Kandahar and mount a serious challenge in the south to the Afghan government seems overblown.

The jailbreak, a combined assault by heavily armed fighters and suicide-bombers, blasted open the crumbling mud brick Sarposa prison and sent more than 1,000 inmates scurrying into the nearby countryside. It was reported that the Taliban kept a fleet of mini-buses with their engines running outside to collect the 450 Taliban militants housed in the jail.

Until then, the war in Afghanistan had begun quietly this year. The snow in the mountain passes to Pakistan melted, but the seasonal Taliban offensive seen in the past three years largely failed to materialise this time. In Helmand province and along the eastern border, the dangers to NATO and Afghan troops were no longer the Taliban ambushes and protracted firefights that cost the Taliban dear last summer. Instead, the allies faced a growing threat from roadside bombs. But it seems the Taliban were saving their best efforts for "spectaculars". The Sarposa attack cost little but won headlines around the world.

Along the eastern border American forces claims to have had the upper hand against fighters crossing from Pakistan's tribal areas, until renewed negotiations in April between the Pakistan government and militant groups led to an immediate spike in activity in the area. This week President Hamid Karzai made one of his angriest outbursts yet against Pakistan's failure to prevent cross-border incursions, and threatened to send the Afghan army into Pakistan in pursuit.

Western commanders insist that overall the Taliban are wilting under the pressure. NATO, rather than the Taliban, has been initiating much of the fighting, they claim, which explains why more Western soldiers are being killed than last year. Indeed, last month for the first time since 2003, more Western troops (23) died in Afghanistan than in Iraq (21).

In the south April and May were dominated by a joint British and American offensive in Garmser, an area of southern Helmand where British and Taliban fighters had faced each other in stalemate for the past two years. The deployment of 2,300 American marines drove up to 800 Taliban fighters out of fixed positions that included trenches, tunnels and bunker systems. NATO reported 200 Taliban killed for the loss of one American marine.

In the weeks after the Garmser operation NATO detected a significant knock-on effect on Taliban activity elsewhere in the province. Western commanders spoke of the poor co-ordination of Taliban operations, their difficulties with logistics and morale, and the increasing prominence of foreign fighters in their ranks. The past week appears to be the Taliban's riposte. They needed, as one senior British officer puts it, "to show they are still in the fight".

Not only did the Sarposa jailbreak provide a boost to morale, it gave some substance to the Taliban's assertion that the Afghan government is not in control across the south. The subsequent days have seen reports of hundreds of Taliban fighters massing in the district of Arghandab, close to Kandahar city. This allows the Taliban's tirelessly upbeat spokesmen to announce that they are threatening the city and for the Western press to recall the Tet offensive, which heralded the North's victory in the Vietnam war.

Arghandab is the sort of "close country" that favours the Taliban, with orchards, narrow lanes and a dense civilian population. It is controlled by the Alakozai tribe, which is in general pro-government. But the Taliban has assassinated three prominent tribal leaders in the past year, and the Alakozai have shown signs of disenchantment, disappointed at not enjoying more influence in and around Kandahar under the Karzai administration.

There is a risk of terrorist attacks in Kandahar in the coming weeks. But there is no realistic chance that Kandahar city will fall, and the insurgents are unlikely to stand and fight long in Arghandab. In the nearby district of Panjwai, up to 1,500 Taliban were killed in September 2006 when they rashly concentrated their forces around the village of Pashmul. NATO spokesmen boast of the speed with which a battalion of Afghan National Army soldiers was deployed to Kandahar after the jailbreak. They say this shows the improving capability of the Afghan security forces. That may be true. But in the war of perceptions, the Taliban will consider that they have had the best of the past week.

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