

Taliban Takeover Of Town Could Mark Start Of Military Offensive

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By Ahmed Rashid

The fall of Musa Qala, a small town in Afghanistan's southern Helmand Province, may herald the start of an offensive by the Taliban in order to preempt NATO reinforcements that are arriving in southern portions of the country. The Taliban attack came amid a regular rotation of commanders of the NATO force, with British Gen. David Richards, an expert at negotiations, giving way to an American, Gen. Dan McNeill.

Several hundred Taliban insurgents overran Musa Qala on February 2. The attack laid waste to an agreement there, brokered last fall by Richards and local tribal elders, under which NATO troops agreed to withdraw from the town in return for a commitment by local Afghan leaders to oppose the Taliban. On February 4, a NATO air strike killed the Taliban commander, identified as Mullah Abdul Ghaffar, who was supposedly in charge of the Musa Qala operation.

The retaliatory air strike came shortly before Richards relinquished command of the 33,000-strong NATO force, including 14,000 Americans. A separate American force, numbering roughly 8,000, operates in Afghanistan independently of NATO command.

Officials in several European countries have quietly expressed concern about placing an American general in charge of the NATO force. Richards tried to create a less harsh, more economic-development-oriented identity for NATO in Afghanistan, as compared to the "kicking-down-doors" image that US forces have. Many local analysts expect NATO forces to embrace a more aggressive stance under McNeill, who is believed to oppose the type of local peace arrangements that Richards promoted. The danger at this point is that an overly aggressive NATO force in Afghanistan could alienate Afghans, and thus cause the Taliban's support base to grow.

Regardless of the approach adopted by McNeill, most experts expect that NATO will soon face a spring offensive by the Taliban.

Richards' legacy remains controversial both in Afghanistan and in NATO member states. Critics, including Afghan President Hamid Karzai and senior US officials, have frequently accused Richards of being too soft; toward Pakistan, which has done little to stem the Taliban's ability to infiltrate into Afghanistan; toward European members of NATO that have refused to drop the restrictive caveats that their troops operate under; and even toward the Taliban.

"I give the Pakistan government and army more credit for what they are achieving than most do, but we all agree that they have to do much more," said Richards, rolling back his previously favorable statements in support of President Pervez Musharraf. [For additional information see the Eurasia Insight archive]. Richards defended his record strongly. "The Taliban actually failed to achieve a single one of their military objectives in 2006 - the defeat of NATO, seizing Kandahar, kicking the Brits out of Helmand or a reign of terror in Kabul - nothing was achieved," he said.

Even many of Richards' critics admit that the British general's room for maneuver was hampered by a variety of tactical and strategic problems, including an under-manned and under-equipped NATO force, a lack of international commitment, and a muddled chain of command involving Washington, London and Brussels. Ironically, his diplomatic efforts to expand the NATO force are now bearing fruit - just as he leaves the country.

“My successor [O’Neill] will have another 5,000 troops - three crack US battalions of the 82 Airborne Division, 1,000 Poles and more Brits,” he said. A mobile reserve force of 1,000 US troops -- something that Richards pleaded for during his tenure as the force commander but never received -- “is now kitting out in Kandahar,” he added.

Richards also pointed out that the Afghan National Army (ANA), which now has 40,000 trained troops, is set to undergo a significant expansion over the next two years. The ANA’s size is expected to grow to 70,000 troops over that time, and it will receive roughly \$8 billion in aid to modernize its arms and equipment.

“The platform I have given my successor can be exploited - we can hold the ring and more in 2007, and by the end of year things could be looking very good,” said Richards.

Pakistan is said to want Richards to remain active in Afghanistan - to serve as a diplomatic mediator in the feud between Musharraf and Karzai. Pakistani officials say they see Richards as an ideal mediator - a job he could do part time from his NATO command post in Germany. However, a host of other leading players would have to sign off on the new role for Richards, including Karzai, Britain, the United States, the NATO Secretary General, the UN and key European allies.