

FEATURES

The mood of the Afghan people has tipped into a popular revolt in some parts of southern Afghanistan, presenting incoming US forces with an even harder job than expected in reversing military losses to the Taliban and winning over the population.

Villagers in some districts have taken up arms against foreign troops to protect their homes or in anger after losing relatives in airstrikes, several community representatives said in interviews. Others have been moved to join the insurgents out of poverty or simply because the Taliban's influence is so pervasive here.

On Thursday morning, 4,000 US Marines began a major offensive to try to take back the region from the strongest Taliban insurgency in the country. The Marines are part of a larger deployment of additional troops being ordered by the new US commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley A. McChrystal, to concentrate not just on killing Taliban fighters but on protecting the population.

Yet Taliban control of the countryside is so extensive in provinces like Kandahar and Helmand that winning districts back will involve tough fighting and may ignite further tensions, residents and local officials warn. The government has no presence in five of Helmand's 13 districts, and in several others, like Nawa, it holds only the district town, where troops and officials live virtually under siege.

The Taliban's influence is so strong in rural areas that much of the local population has accepted their rule and is watching the US troop buildup with trepidation. Villagers interviewed in late June said they preferred to be left alone under Taliban rule and complained about artillery fire and airstrikes by foreign forces. "We Muslims don't like them — they are the source of danger," a villager, Hajji Taj Muhammad, said of the foreign forces. His house in Marja, a town west of this provincial capital that has been a major opium trading post and Taliban base, was bombed two months ago, he said.

The southern provinces have suffered the worst civilian casualties since NATO's deployment to the region in 2006. Thousands of people have already been displaced by fighting and taken refuge in the towns.

"Now there are more people siding with the Taliban than with the government," said Abdul Qadir Noorzai, head of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission in southern Afghanistan.

In many places, people have never seen or felt the presence of the Afghan government, or foreign forces, except through violence, but the Taliban are a known quantity, community leaders said.

"People are hostages of the Taliban, but they look at the coalition also as the enemy, because they have not seen anything good from them in seven or eight years," said Hajji Abdul Ahad Helmandwal, a district council leader from Nadali in Helmand province.

Foreign troops continue to make mistakes that enrage whole sections of

As US troops launch a major offensive in southern Afghanistan to root out insurgents and stabilize the region, they risk further alienating a population that in many areas has accepted Taliban rule and is hostile to foreign intervention

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Lance Corporal Bradley Watkin-Bennett of the 1st Battalion Welsh Guard, above, fires a rocket at Taliban positions in Nad Ali, in Afghanistan's Helmand province. Boys herd sheep past a group of British soldiers washing in a canal in Nad Ali. The soldiers have set a security perimeter around their patrol base and allow many farmers and herders to roam with relative freedom inside their security lines so as not to alienate the local population.

this deeply tribal society, like the killing of a tribal elder's son and his wife as they were driving to their home in Helmand two months ago. Only their infant daughter survived. The tribal elder, Reis-e-Baghran, a former member of the Taliban who reconciled with the government, is one of the most influential figures in Helmand.

The infusion of more US troops into southern Afghanistan is aimed at ending a stalemate between NATO and Taliban forces. The governor of Helmand, Gulab Mangal, said extra forces were needed since the Taliban were now so entrenched in southern Afghanistan that they had permanent bases from which they mounted operations.

Yet he and others warn that there will be more bloodshed and that the large influx of foreign forces could prompt a backlash.

In parts of Helmand and Kandahar, resentment and frustration are rampant. People who traveled to Lashkar Gah from the districts complained of continued civilian suffering and questioned US intentions.

"They come here just to fight, not to bring peace," said Allah Nazad, a farmer.

People from Marja said that foreign troops carrying out counternarcotics operations conducted nighttime raids on houses, sometimes killed people inside their homes, and used dogs that bit the occupants.

"The people are very scared of the night raids," said Spin Gul, a local farmer. "When they have night raids, the people join the Taliban and fight."

"Who are the Taliban?" interjected another man, who did not give his name. "They are local people."

One man, Hamza, said he would fight if foreigners raided his house. "I will not allow them," he said. "I will fight them to the last drop of blood."

Many do not side with the Taliban out of choice, however, and could be won over, community leaders said.

Fazel Muhammad, a member of the district council of Panjwai, an area west of Kandahar where three years of fighting have ruined livelihoods, said he knew people who were laying mines for the Taliban to feed their families. He estimated that 80 percent of insurgents were local people driven to fight out of poverty and despair. Offered another way out, only 2 percent would support the Taliban, he said.

Yet mistrust of the government remains so strong that even if the Taliban were defeated militarily, the government and the US-led coalition would find the population reluctant to cooperate, said Hajji Abdullah Jan, the leader of the provincial council of Helmand.

"These people will still not trust the government," he said. "Even if security is 100 percent, it will take time because the government did not keep its promises in the past."

Marines push into a cauldron of resentment



Why the next astronaut on the moon will be Chinese

In 2003, then-US president George W. Bush announced plans for NASA to return to the moon by 2020. But China could get there well before then

BY ALOK JHA AND DAVID ADAM
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Since the crew of *Apollo 17* returned from the moon in December 1972, no human has left low-Earth orbit. Five space shuttles, scores of Russian Soyuz capsules, the International Space Station, and more than 450 men and women have left the Earth since *Apollo*, but all have been bound to a small shell of space just outside our atmosphere.

Any hope of an ambitious successor to *Apollo* might have been abandoned altogether if it wasn't for former US president George W. Bush. In 2003, he announced plans for NASA to return to the moon by 2020 and then travel on to Mars by 2030. Once again, though, the US faces some serious competition. The same year that Bush tasked NASA with the 21st-century moon shot, Yang Liwei (杨利伟) became China's first astronaut and, explicit or not, another space race had begun.

"The attitude to the space program in China is a little bit like the attitude towards space exploration

in the Western world in the 1960s," says Kevin Fong, an expert in space medicine at University College London. "There's a deep fervor among their university kids for space technology. The main difference between China and America now is that China can just do something — they don't need to ask permission or go through a democratic process and get the budget approved."

This means that China can progress its space program quickly; if it wants to land on the moon — and many observers think it does — the country could do it well ahead of 2020, the earliest possible date for an American return.

China's only confirmed plans so far include launching another robotic orbiter to the moon, probably followed by a robot lander and perhaps a lunar rover. Beyond that, we might not know whether China wants to put a person on the moon until it does it. Its successes are broadcast all over the world, but its failures remain internal. That hasn't stopped serious people taking it



Astronauts Zhai Zhigang, center, Liu Boming, right, and Jing Haipeng were launched last September on China's third manned space mission.

seriously, though: last year the former NASA administrator, Mike Griffin, said he believed China had the capability to get to the moon and he wouldn't be surprised if the next person to

walk on the moon was Chinese.

"It's all very dark out there and you're not really sure how much they're doing," says Fong. "They seem very serious about it and have mature thoughts about it, from the little you see in their presentations. They still have much to learn from the existing space community and don't want to be too overt about their ambitions at risk of looking like they've over-promised."

The Indians are also hot on the heels of the US. India worked on an embryonic space program with the Soviet Union in the 1970s and flew its first cosmonaut in 1982. Today the budgets are relatively big — around US\$800 million a year and a 10-year plan for human space flight that has committed funding of more than US\$1.2 billion. It has already sent a robotic probe to the moon, but there is still plenty to prove in terms of human space flight — the country has indicated bold ambitions but has yet to confirm that it will send people into orbit,

never mind all the way to the moon.

The Chinese and the Indians have many advantages over the Americans of the 1960s — for one thing, they are starting well ahead of *Apollo* in terms of technology. But it might not be technology that decides the winner. Aiming for space is about more than understanding flight paths and knowing the best rockets to use: moon shots are about taking risks. Fong points out that the *Apollo* program prioritized mission objectives over life or limb. No one was complacent about the danger, he says, but since most of the astronauts were former test pilots, they understood that things can — and would — go wrong. The modern NASA has inverted this priority — today the astronauts' lives are absolutely more important than mission goals. This will have to change if NASA is to return to the moon and, particularly, if it wants to send people to Mars. And perhaps here China will have a clear advantage over the US.