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Afghan, foreign troops storm into Musa Qala: Gen. Azimi

KABUL, Dec 10 (Pajhwok Afghan News): Afghan and NATO forces have stormed into a Taliban-held town in the troubled southern province of Helmand, the Defence Ministry announced here on Monday.

Backed by International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Coalition troops, Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers were busy purging suburban areas of the Musa Qala district of militants, a spokesman for the ministry claimed.

In an exclusive chat with Pajhwok Afghan News, Gen. Zahir Azimi insisted the troops were closing in on Taliban positions in the embattled town. However, he gave no more details of the joint Afghan-NATO offensive aimed at wresting back the control of the rebel stronghold.

But Taliban, repudiating the assertion, said the fighters remained in their positions and that there had been no change in the lines of defence. Eight insurgents had been killed and another six wounded during the fighting hitherto, Qari Yousaf Ahmadi added.

Speaking to this news agency from an undisclosed location, Ahmadi claimed 30 Afghan and foreign soldiers had been killed in fierce clashes triggered by the assault that began on Friday.

Earlier in the day, Pajhwoks correspondent based in Lashkargah quoted a police chief as saying the fighters were retreating from their positions and the soldiers - having broken the enemys first line of defence - were advancing on the centre of the district.

Brig. Gen. Muhammad Hussein Andiwai said the militants were being pushed back to Baghran and Sangin districts as a result of the sweep.

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Fierce fighting was going on for the control of the district, said resident Muhammad Shah. Like other civilians, we too are faced with great hardships, spending winter nights under the open sky, he said, adding the warring parties were using heavy weapons.

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Also on Monday, the US-led Coalition said several militants were killed and 10 others captured during an operation targeting insurgent networks in the town. At least two civilians were wounded in the fighting sparked by a search of compounds in Musa Qala.

The attack targetted people associated with a weapons facilitator, believed to have been killed in an earlier precision strike in the area, the Coalition said. It added the combined force detained 10 people suspected of having links to insurgent weapons facilitation networks.

A day earlier, two important insurgent commanders were seized as Afghan and NATO troops pressed on with the joint offensive. Mullah Matin Akhund and Mullah Rahim Akhund were detained during the ongoing operation codenamed Zafar (Success).

Under a controversial agreement, the British military withdrew from the Taliban stronghold and handed it over to local tribal elders in October 2006, but four months later the town fell to the guerrillas, who have since been in control.

Reported by Najib Khilwatgar  
Translated & edited by S. Mudassir Ali Shah

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