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## NATO Seeks to Retake Taliban Haven

By **TAIMOOR SHAH**

KANDAHAR, [Afghanistan](#), Dec. 7 — Townspeople fled their homes in southern Afghanistan today as [NATO](#) forces mounted an offensive to retake the town of Musa Qala, which has been a haven for [Taliban](#) fighters since British forces abandoned it in October last year.

The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force announced it had mounted an operation along with Afghan National Army troops to retake the town in the southern province of Helmand.

“An operation to retake the town of Musa Qala has started today, Dec. 7,” ISAF said in a statement released in Kabul, the capital. “In order to assist the Afghan National Army, ISAF Forces have launched an insertion of troops by helicopter on the edge of the town. This operation will continue for the next few days.”

Local residents reached by telephone said people were evacuating Musa Qala after skirmishes began on the edge of the town and three bombs landed in the outskirts. Shopkeepers were packing up their goods because they were afraid of looting once Afghan troops arrived.

“The coalition troops are getting closer to Musa Qala town, they are just 10 kilometers away,” said Niamat Jan, a shopkeeper. “They dropped three bombs on the town. I don’t know what the casualties were. All the entrances to the town have been blocked by them.

“We are in great fear, the people moved out of the town and scattered elsewhere. Most of the families have moved to the desert and settled there. The town has been completely evacuated.”

More than any other place in southern Afghanistan, Musa Qala has highlighted the difficulties and the mistakes NATO troops have made over the last two years in the face of a resurgent Taliban.

British troops deployed in large numbers in the spring of 2006, but made the mistake of trying to use small numbers of soldiers to protect district towns. They rapidly came under siege from Taliban fighters who poured into Helmand province in far larger numbers than had been anticipated.

The British have since been working to regain the upper hand, pulling out of places like Musa Qala, and consolidating control of the central region around the capital. Since this spring, they have steadily been pushing outwards from that central region, slowly securing key towns and districts and establishing Afghan forces to hold those areas before moving on.

Musa Qala was left alone even though commanders acknowledged that it was a haven for several thousand Taliban fighters. British troops pulled out under an agreement with local elders who were to ensure the Taliban fighters would also stay out of the town. But in February, just three months later, the Taliban overran the town and dismissed the ruling council of elders.

Since then, Musa Qala has become a base for Taliban fighters moving across northern Helmand and into provinces to the north. Large numbers of insurgents, including foreign fighters, flocked to the area.

Musa Qala is one of the only bases the Taliban hold, and it is not clear if they will try to defend the town or pull back into the hills.

Afghan troops have been operating across northern Helmand since the beginning of November, the NATO statement said. The Afghan Defense Ministry spokesman, General Mohammad Zahir Azimi, described it as a "massive multi-purpose operation" in the north of Helmand province, Agence France Presse reported. "It includes a military operation, sweep-up operation, clearance, imposing the rule of law and providing an atmosphere for reconstruction," he said.

Residents reported fighting on the edge of Musa Qala today. "Several skirmishes have taken place nearby Musa Qala district," said Mahmood, a doctor living in the town, who uses only one name. He said he had this afternoon heard a half-hour exchange of guns and rockets between NATO and Taliban forces.

"This situation really made us crazy, we are running, where to go, how to go and how to protect our women and children from this cataclysm," he said.

Aminullah, a shopkeeper, said: "The situation is worsening quite a bit, coalition forces are getting closer to Musa Qala. They are in great numbers, around 500 tanks and vehicles, and helicopters are circulating nearby." Afghan commonly describe British armored vehicles mounted with a machine gun as tanks.

"People are taking their goods from their shops, the fear if Musa Qala falls into the hands of Afghan forces, they will lose their goods," he said.

*Carlotta Gall contributed reporting from Islamabad, Pakistan.*

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