

# World

## Taliban kill elite troops and overrun a haven

SANG-E-MASHA, AFGHANISTAN

### U.S.-trained commandos prove for be no match for determined insurgents

BY ROD NORDLAND

One pickup truck after another arrived at the government compound in a district capital in Afghanistan on Sunday, pulling around to the back of the governor's office to unload the dead, out of sight of panicked residents.

Soldiers and police officers, many in tears, heaved bodies of their comrades from the trucks and laid them on sheets on the ground, side by side on their backs, until there were 20 of them.

The dead all wore the desert-brown boots of Afghanistan's finest troops, the Special Forces commandos trained by the United States. Four days earlier, the soldiers had been airlifted in to rescue what is widely considered Afghanistan's safest rural district, Jaghori, from a determined assault by Taliban insurgents.

Early on Sunday, their company of 50 soldiers was almost entirely destroyed on the front line. And suddenly, Jaghori — a haven for an ethnic Hazara Shiite minority that has been persecuted by extremists — appeared at risk of being completely overrun by the Taliban.

A small team of journalists from The New York Times went into Jaghori's capital, Sang-e-Masha, on Sunday morning to report on the symbolic importance of what everyone expected to be a fierce stand against the insurgents.

Instead, we found bandaged commandos wandering the streets in apparent despair, and officials discussing how they could flee an area almost entirely surrounded by the Taliban. By the end of the day, we were on the run, too.

Officials told us that more than 30 of the commandos had been killed, and we could see, on the streets and in the hospitals, 10 other wounded commandos. An additional 50 police officers and militiamen were also killed in the previous 24 hours, according to the militia's commander, Nazer Hussein, who arrived from the front line with his wounded to

plead for reinforcements. "This is genocide," Commander Hussein said. "If they don't do something soon, the whole district will be in the Taliban's hands."

The disaster prompted a protest by Hazaras in the Afghan capital Kabul, who railed against what they said was government inaction, but even that took a deadly turn. The demonstration had just ended on Monday when a suicide bomber struck, killing three women and three men, one of them a police officer, according to a spokesman for the Interior Ministry.

### AFGHANISTAN'S SHANGRI-LA

Jaghori's 600,000 people are poor and live in an isolated part of the central highlands, an area that has no paved roads or electric lines, with terraced wheat fields and abundant orchards of almond and apple trees.

But the district is famous for how peaceful it had been. Most people say they cannot remember the last time there was a murder or serious robbery. And the district's education record is aspirational for the rest of the country: Schooling is nearly universal among girls, and much higher than the Afghan average for boys.

(Nationally, less than a fourth of Afghan girls complete high school.)

In recent years, though, Jaghori District has largely been cut off from the rest of the country, since it is in Ghazni Province, much of which is controlled by the Taliban, and the main roads leading to the district have been blocked by the insurgents.

A week ago, the Taliban broke a long-standing truce and attacked Jaghori from three directions in what appeared to be a determined effort to take the district, as the insurgents have done elsewhere with increasing frequency, inflicting steadily rising death tolls on government forces.

"The Taliban attacked us because this is where all the schools are, and because here there are even more girls in school than boys," said Mubarez Nabizada, who works for the charity Shuhada, which runs orphanages and a hospital.

The spot of hardest fighting has been Hotqol, a market town a few miles from Sang-e-Masha. Starting on Nov. 5, the Taliban ambushed eight border out-



The bodies of 20 American-trained commandos were lined up outside the governor's office in Sang-e-Masha, Afghanistan, on Sunday.

posts in Hotqol, all manned by local militiamen, an informal grouping of armed locals without official government support.

A celebrated Hazara commander from the anti-Soviet jihad days, Gen. Habibullah Bashi, was among the dead on the first day, and 30 of his armed followers went missing, including three of his sons, all presumed killed, according to his 19-year-old son, Mohammadi Bashi.

"I buried my father, but we weren't able to find my brothers," he said.

General Bashi's personal bodyguard, Sayid Hussein, also fled, and on Sunday was sitting dejectedly in the back of a pickup truck with a machine gun mounted on the cab. Like many local Hazaras, he was angry that the government had not given them more support. "All they give us is promises, but what

can we do with promises?" he said. "Twenty from my family are dead."

The governor of Jaghori District, Zafar Sharif, said that there had been no Afghan troops in the district before the commandos arrived on Wednesday — only 250 police officers, plus the informal militia groups. About 1,000 Taliban had attacked, he said.

### "IT WILL WEAKEN MORALE HERE"

As the bodies of the Afghan commandos began being lined up in the government building's courtyard, Governor Sharif was upstairs in a meeting with a delegation from Kabul, sent by President Ashraf Ghani. From the top of a glass-fronted staircase, he had a view of the bodies being lined up below. He burst into tears, weeping uncontrollably.

"Even infidels would not do this," he said. "This is another Karbala." The ref-

erence was to a historic massacre of Shiites by Sunnis.

One of the delegation members, Qais Sargand, from the Interior Ministry, said the complaints that Jaghori District had not received enough resources were exaggerated for political reasons. He said that local leaders' desire to have the government arm thousands of militiamen would undercut efforts to have a regular military under central authority. "If we do that here, they will want it in Badghis Province and Kandahar, Nangarhar and all over the country," Mr. Sargand said.

Mr. Sargand was also very emotional about the dead commandos. "When I see their bodies, I remember their live faces, because I have met them one by one on the front line," he said.

"The local politicians wanted to show that commandos couldn't do it," he add-

ed. "Our commandos said when they were fighting they got no support from the militiamen."

All over the district capital, Sang-e-Masha, people were waiting for military helicopters from Kabul. Both of the hospitals had critically wounded fighters who needed urgent evacuation.

As the soldiers' bodies arrived two and three at a time, officials with the presidential delegation warned that they should be kept out of sight so as not to create panic.

The head of the delegation, the presidential adviser Asadullah Falah, left the meetings to grant an interview, in which he sought to play down the crisis. "We have some casualties, but we're still not definite about how many," he said.

Told that the bodies of 20 commandos were plainly visible just outside the window of that room, he said that many must have been police officers and militiamen. They were all in uniforms with commando shoulder patches.

Mr. Falah answered a phone call about the helicopters; four were on their way, so his 15-member delegation could also leave, he was told.

"Tell one of them to land in the governor's compound, so people don't see the bodies," he told the caller, within earshot of a Times reporter. "It will weaken morale here."

But by the time it grew dark, the helicopters had not arrived. The Taliban mostly fight at night, and were expected to renew their offensive, especially in Hotqol, where the commandos were killed on Sunday.

Commander Hussein squeezed into a car with a half-dozen other fighters and left. "If Hotqol falls, the whole of Jaghori will fall," he said.

By late Sunday night, reports came that Hotqol was now undefended, and families were fleeing from there and the next town as well. Panic set in amid rumors that the Taliban were only an hour away from Sang-e-Masha.

Governor Sharif went into hiding. We fled, too, along mountain tracks barely visible in the darkness. Nearly all of the traffic was one way, cars and even dump trucks packed with families escaping Afghanistan's latest catastrophe.

Fahim Abed contributed reporting.

ADVERTISING SUPPLEMENT

## HOW GIANT PANDAS WERE SAVED FROM EXTINCTION

### AGAINST ALL ODDS

The giant panda is an iconic and lovable animal known worldwide, with an insatiable appetite for bamboo. This appetite makes his native land south-central China, where bamboo forests flourish. Because of the deforestation of its natural habit and poaching, the Giant Panda was on the brink of extinction until conservation efforts began in 1958 through the Wolong National Nature Reserve in Sichuan.

The number of similar reserves has grown from 13 in 1998 to 67, in Sichuan and neighboring Shaanxi and Gansu provinces.

The wild panda population has also increased by 16.8 percent since 2003, to a total of 1,864, according to the WWF report "A Victory for

Pandas." Another 518 are in captivity worldwide, with a healthy and sustainable breeding population. This is a considerable victory for these pandas, which narrowly avoided extinction.

The host habitats of these creatures are some of the most biologically diverse in the world, sheltering over 8,000 species of animals and plants. The giant panda, under the protection of China's State of Forestry and Grassland Administration, is one of the few species whose natural habitat has been designated as a Unesco World Heritage site. Thanks to ongoing conservation efforts, this adorable animal finds home in the Sichuan Giant Panda Sanctuaries, with seven natural reserves having been inscribed in the World Heritage List back in 2006. But conservation of their habitat was not enough.

The survival of the giant panda was hindered by their curious lack of libido, brief breeding seasons, low fertility and the poor survival rate of cubs. To help nature take

its course, researchers needed to do more than preserve the pandas' natural habitats. Research centers like the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding and the Shaanxi Louguantai Giant Panda Rescue Center put scientific efforts into facilitating breeding in captivity. Their researchers bred 63 giant panda cubs through artificial insemination, with 58 surviving — a more than 92 percent success rate, no small feat.

These actions and successes led to the species being reclassified from "endangered" by the International Union for Conservation of Nature to "conservation-reliant vulnerable," indicating the positive recovery of the population with conservation support, back in 2016.

Ongoing efforts to save the giant panda have now led China to create a Giant Panda National Park three times the size of Yellowstone National Park in the United States, protecting 86 percent of the wild population and 70 percent of their habitat.



## THE GIANT PANDA CULTURE

A biennial international celebration of China's 60 years of conservation efforts to rescue the giant panda, China's Giant Panda International Culture Week, was launched on Aug. 23, 2018 in Beijing.

The giant panda came to be a symbol of peace when it played a diplomatic role in creating cultural exchange between China and the West in the 1970s. Giant pandas were sent as gifts to Western zoos, which became known as "panda diplomacy."



This special advertising supplement is sponsored by Sichuan Province Government. The news and editorial staff of The New York Times has no role in its preparation.