

## Kandahar-area region stable again: Afghan officials (Afghanistan)

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**Residents can now safely return to the fertile Arghandab region near Kandahar, a week after Canadian and Afghan troops moved into the area to clear it of Taliban militants, Afghan officials said Monday.**

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Commanders with the Afghan army and police, who held a joint press conference in Afghanistan on Monday, said roads in the Arghandab region, northwest of the large city of Kandahar, have finally been cleared of land mines, and any remaining Taliban fighters holed up in the area have been removed.

The commanders accused the Taliban of harming the livelihoods of innocent residents by infiltrating the region at the height of the harvest season, a time when impoverished farmers in the area need to tend to their grape and pomegranate crops.

Hundreds of Taliban moved into the area a week ago, shortly after fighters stormed the main prison in Kandahar on June 13, freeing 400 suspected militants. Residents and local officials feared the buildup of militants meant an attack on the city of Kandahar, just 15 kilometres away, was imminent.

100 Taliban fighters confirmed dead

Estimates of the number of Taliban fighters who had infiltrated the region varied from 150 to 600, but on Monday the Afghan commanders confirmed it was likely 500 to 600.

They said at least 100 militants were killed when the Afghan troops, supported by Canadian soldiers and other NATO troops, moved into the region Wednesday. Two Afghan soldiers were also reported dead, but there were no Canadian or NATO casualties.

The number of Taliban dead might be higher than 100, the commanders said, because many Taliban fighters fled the region after NATO moved in, carrying their comrades' dead bodies with them. Within 24 hours, NATO was declaring the mission a victory.

The Afghan commanders said several Taliban militants were arrested during the operation, including some of the fighters who were freed in the prison break. The escaped convicts are being interrogated, the commanders said.

The Afghan army is continuing to patrol the area to ensure the Taliban do not return, the commanders said.

Attack kills 55 in eastern Afghanistan

Meanwhile, NATO killed 55 militants in eastern Afghanistan on Friday, NATO officials confirmed Monday in a statement. The battle took place in the Paktika province, which borders Pakistan.

NATO said militants ambushed a patrol with rocket and gun fire, prompting troops to fire back and call in warplanes.

Among the 55 dead were three key Taliban leaders, NATO said, without naming the leaders.

Twenty-five militants were injured in the battle, and three others arrested, NATO said.

It's unclear whether any Canadians participated in this battle.

The 2,500 Canadian troops stationed in Afghanistan are serving primarily in the southern Kandahar region. Canada joined the mission, which is now overseen by NATO, in 2002.

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[<<< zurück zu: News](#)

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