

## THE BATTLE FOR KUNDUZ

26 November 2001 | KUNDUZ, Afghanistan

At 8:00 Monday morning, after almost two weeks of waiting, Northern Alliance forces loyal to General Daoud Khan finally entered the outskirts of Kunduz, an important agricultural center that links Kabul, Mazar-I-Sharif and Taloqan. A force of several thousand fighters in pickup trucks, taxis and massive Russian Kamaz vehicles were seen moving toward the city shortly after daybreak.

Many fighters seemed nervous and preoccupied, not jubilant as they had been when they entered Taloqan Nov. 11. They met with some Taliban resistance there was fierce fighting much of the morning near the Kunduz market but by noon the Northern Alliance controlled the city. Yet while Kunduz has fallen, the fighting may not be over. Almost immediately, internecine warfare broke out among rival Northern Alliance fighters, and a lasting peace may still be elusive.

The Northern Alliance had been stopped for almost two weeks near the village of Bangi, after resistance by Taliban fighters forced them to retreat Nov. 12. Meanwhile, negotiations with Taliban commanders yielded significant numbers of defecting fighters. On Saturday, Amidullah Khan, a Taliban commander, crossed the front lines at Amirabad, a village near Bangi, with several hundred men, four tanks and a collection of coveted pickup trucks. As soon as the men surrendered, Northern Alliance fighters climbed up on the vehicles, plastering them with posters of Ahmed Shah Masoud, the

slain mujahadin leader who is revered here as a saint. Once a captured vehicle received a poster of Masoud, it officially became the property of the Northern Alliance.

As the surrendering Taliban fighters came into view around a bend in the road, the mujahadin cheered and shouted encouragement to their former rivals. As many as 1,000 defectors had crossed the front lines near Bangi in the past few days, drastically weakening the Taliban position in both Khanabad and Kunduz, and setting the stage for Monday's final assault on Kunduz. The Northern Alliance had claimed for days that the decisive move on Kunduz had begun, and even that Kunduz had already fallen, but it was mostly talk. On Sunday afternoon, the column of fighters loyal to Khan moved through the village of Khanabad, just west of Bangi, and found it largely deserted. Instead of proceeding the remaining distance to Kunduz during the night, they waited near the village of Ludin several kilometers from the Taliban held city. The column of fighters only received the order to move on Kunduz on Monday morning.

Local residents of Kunduz, many of whom are Pashtuns, a different ethnic group than the largely Tajik and Uzbek Northern Alliance, did not cheer the troops as they entered the city. Crowds stood by the road silently watching as the fighters drove into town. Shortly after Khan's troops entered the city on Monday, they ran straight into a dedicated force of Taliban fighters holed up in the buildings surrounding the main market, where an intense battle ensued. One Taliban fighter, wearing a large black turban, was seen disappearing around a corner as Northern Alliance forces drove to the center of town. While some of the Taliban fled to neighboring villages, it was clear that others stayed to fight, with deadly results. In a battle that started at about 8:30 am, both sides exchanged volleys of rockets, machine gun fire, and rocket-propelled grenades in a bloody clash lasting the better part of an hour. A hail of projectiles flew down the main street of Kunduz, demolishing

buildings and trees while many of the residents hid in their houses. Northern Alliance forces were thrown into disarray by the resistance, and some fighters retreated to safer positions inside the city.

Soon, at least five dead Taliban fighters lay in pools of blood, while several were dying nearby. All had been shot. As a crowd formed around one injured Taliban fighter, several local residents debated whether or not to kill him on the spot. When the man moved, the crowd seemed to sway and buckle in fear. Finally, one older man, named Azim argued for the injured fighter's life, saying, "We mujahadin do not kill wounded prisoners." Although the crowd surrounding the wounded Taliban fighter backed away, it was not clear if the man survived his injuries. The local clinic had been looted of its best medical supplies.

The mood in the city immediately following the battle in the market was extremely tense. In one incident, Taj Mohammed, a Northern Alliance commander accepted a group of six captured Taliban fighters in front of a television camera, saying, "You will not be killed, you will only be sent to prison." Then the captured men were bundled into pickup trucks and driven away to an unknown location.

Meanwhile, fresh fighting broke out between rival Northern Alliance commanders in the center of the city, possibly over the division of the spoils of war, causing a stampede and a wild panic among the occupying forces. Another similar incident took place later in the morning, when angry rival Northern Alliance commanders exchanged rocket-propelled grenades and machine-gun fire on the road leading to the Kunduz airport. Men in army uniforms, unlike the traditional blankets and caps worn by the local fighters, seemed at a loss as to how to preserve discipline in the occupying force. By one in the afternoon, however, the city was calm, with only sporadic gunfire coming from outlying neighborhoods. ■