

Taliban fighters are increasingly using civilians as human shields in the assault on the southern town of Marjah, an Afghan official said Wednesday as military squads resumed painstaking house-to-house searches in the Taliban stronghold.

About 15,000 NATO and Afghan troops are taking part in the offensive around Marjah, which has an estimated 80,000 inhabitants and was the largest town in southern Helmand province under Taliban control. NATO hopes to rush in aid and public services as soon as the town is secured to try to win the loyalty of the population.

With the assault in its fifth day, insurgents are firing at Afghan troops from inside or next to compounds where women and children appear to have been ordered to stand on a roof or in a window, said Gen. Mohiudin Ghorri, the brigade commander for Afghan troops in Marjah.

"Especially in the south of Marjah, the enemy is fighting from compounds where soldiers can very clearly see women or children on the roof or in a second-floor or third-floor window," Ghorri said. "They are trying to get us to fire on them and kill the civilians."

The Marjah offensive is the biggest joint operation since the 2001 U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan and is a major test of a retooled NATO strategy to focus on protecting civilians, rather than killing insurgents.

Ghorri said troops have made choices either not to fire at the insurgents with civilians nearby or had to target and advance much more slowly in order to distinguish between militants and civilians as they go.

Even with such caution on both the NATO and Afghan side, civilians have been killed. NATO has confirmed 15 civilian deaths in the operation. Afghan rights groups say at least 19 have been killed.

In northern Marjah Wednesday, U.S. Marines fanned out through poppy fields, dirt roads and side alleys to take control of a broader stretch of area from insurgents as machine gun fire rattled in the distance.

The Marines found several compounds that had primitive drawings on their walls depicting insurgents blowing up tanks or helicopters, a sign that Afghan troops say revealed strong Taliban support in the neighborhood.

A day earlier, Marines and Afghan forces moving by land from the north had succeeded in linking up with U.S. units that have faced nearly constant Taliban attack in the four days since they were dropped by helicopter into this insurgent stronghold in southern Afghanistan.

The linkup between the two Marine rifle companies and their Afghan army partners will enable the U.S. to expand its control in Marjah, about 380 miles (610 kilometers) southwest of Kabul.

A top Taliban commander, Mullah Abdul Razaq Akhund, dismissed the offensive as NATO

propaganda and said on the group's Web site that Marjah was militarily insignificant.

Four NATO service members have been killed in the Marjah operation. An American and a Briton were killed on Saturday, while two others whose nationalities were not identified were killed Tuesday. One Afghan soldier also died Tuesday, Afghan officials said.

The Marines and Afghan troops "saw sustained but less frequent insurgent activity" in Marjah on Wednesday, limited mostly to small-scale attacks, NATO said in a statement.

Marine officials have said that Taliban resistance has started to seem more disorganized than in the first few days of the assault, when small teams of insurgents swarmed around Marine and Afghan army positions firing rifles, machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades.

Troops are encountering less fire from mortars and RPGs than at the start of the assault, suggesting that the insurgents may have depleted some of their reserves or that the heavier weapons have been hit, Ghorri said.

Nevertheless, Taliban have not given up. Insurgent snipers hiding in haystacks in poppy fields have exchanged fire with Marines and Afghan troops in recent days as they swept south.

Insurgents tried but failed to shoot down an Osprey aircraft with rocket-propelled grenades as Cobra attack helicopters fired missiles at Taliban positions, including a machine gun bunker. NATO said it has reinstated use of a high-tech rocket system that it suspended after two rockets hit a house on the outskirts of Marjah on Sunday, killing 12 people, including at least five children. The military coalition originally said the missiles went hundreds of yards (meters) off target but said Tuesday that it determined that the rockets hit the intended target.

Afghan officials said three Taliban fighters were in the house at the time. Violence and NATO strikes have continued elsewhere in the country. In neighboring Kandahar province, four Afghan policemen were killed and four others were wounded when their vehicle struck a roadside bomb on Tuesday, the Afghan Interior Ministry said. And in the east, NATO said it killed more than a dozen insurgents in an airstrike near the Pakistani border.

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