

In the sun-baked centre of Afghanistan's Helmand province, once known as a fearsome Taliban stronghold, gunfire cracks over a British convoy as insurgents try to show they are still a force to be reckoned with.

With Western troops in the waning stages of a war in its eleventh year, Helmand mirrors many other troubled pockets of the country where the Taliban have been bruised but not defeated by a surge in U.S. troops.

The Taliban could simply be waiting out the planned pullout of most NATO combat troops by the end of 2014, some experts say.

As a gunbattle rages nearby, Afghan man Juma Khan, wearing a traditional hat and with hennaed-dyed red hair, crouches in the corner of his house with his family.

"You can see how the security situation is right now. Sometimes there's shooting, sometimes not," the unemployed 29-year-old said through a NATO interpreter last week.

"What should we do? The insurgents will kill us. Security is because of the foreign troops."

A series of incidents over the past month including the burning of Korans in a NATO base and the killing of 16 villagers by a U.S. soldier has stirred debate about the withdrawal's timetable, with some in the West asking for a faster pullout.

US President Barack Obama said on Monday the weekend massacre of villagers in Kandahar province increased his determination to get American troops out of Afghanistan.

But here in Helmand - the country's main poppy province - the fear is that the gains of the last few years could be at risk and that the fledgling Afghan national army may struggle to take over security responsibilities.

Violence remains widespread in Helmand and in neighboring Kandahar where Afghan government influence is remote and poppy rife. Six British soldiers were killed on the border of the two provinces last week.

"My opinion is that it'd be better if (foreign troops) stayed. Afghanistan is in need of friends to assist. For 30 years, Afghanistan has been at war and you don't resolve that to peace overnight," Brigadier Sheren Shah of the Afghan national army told Reuters through a British interpreter last week.

Shah said his big worry was that there would not be enough money for training of soldiers and that operations could suffer from a lack of air support and armored vehicles, once foreign troops

leave.

SUCCESS STORY

The three districts in Helmand under British oversight have been held up as a security success story after an influx of foreign troops into the area.

Britain moved into Helmand in 2006 where they were involved in heavy fighting, but the tide began to turn after a surge of soldiers beat back insurgents to a few remaining pockets.

In the three districts, violence has dropped up to 45 percent in the last year, according to Brigadier Patrick Sanders, commander of British forces in Helmand.

"What they're going to be forced to focus their efforts on is rather more terrorist-style tactics so close quarter assassinations, IED (improvised explosive device) spectaculars," Sanders told Reuters last week at a main base in the area.

There are still 1,000 to 1,100 Taliban fighters in the three districts, with poppy farms a key source of funding for them, according to Afghan commanders.

In small square plots, young, green poppy plants sprout out of the ground in a sparsely-populated, arid area of Nad Ali, remote from the main source of water and from where many Afghans in the region live.

Taliban-led militants are believed to make \$100-to-\$400 million a year from drug production and trafficking throughout the country, fuelling insecurity.

"Up to 2014, security will be fine and we'll get training. After 2014, I don't know if security will be good or bad, only God knows that," fruit-seller-turned police officer Mohamad Aslam said on patrol with British forces in Helmand.

Poppy farmers in the area complain they are stuck in the middle of the war and can barely make ends meet.

"Now security is not good. The Taliban come in and take mobile phones from everyone ... We worry a lot about the insurgents. Sometimes they come and want food," Abdel Hadi, a recently married 25-year-old, said in an area known as the "Dashte" in Pashtu, meaning desert.

"At night, we can't move through our land because of insurgents," the poppy farmer said.

With thanks to Reuters.