



Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

Sarah Chayes

Kandahar, January 6, 2008

Outside, it is raining its heart out. Good tidings in Kandahar.

At my desk in the dark office, a gas heater taking the edge off the air, I am writing to you by the light of two candles: a taper in a medieval-looking cast-iron candlestick I bought in Kingston, Ontario, and a fat one, by my left hand, stuck on the spike of a replica Roman candle-stand, from Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Romantic it sounds, and I suppose is, in a way. But romance, to be fully appreciated, ought usually to entail a degree of choice. Here's the deal. We had less than three hours' electricity today. Yesterday it was about two, and the day before, none. When it comes, we fly into a moderate gale. First urgent item: the water pump, to fill our tank. Nearly simultaneously, Mahmooda catches up my minute travel iron, folds a sheet of cloth over our marble coffee table, and starts swiping away at one of the silk turbans in which Arghand soap is now packaged, while Nurallah leaps for the shrink-wrap machine. Methodical Fayzullah hauls a sack of cleaned hemp seed over to the electric seed oil press, and everything whirs. For a while.

More than six years after the fall of the Taliban, the international community, which has had stewardship over Afghanistan – these thirty-plus richest and most buttoned up countries on the planet, which have poured billions into the operation – has not figured out how to power the place. Note: counting the past two days, and perhaps two more full weeks of rain during this and the beginning of the next rainy season in December, there will be approximately 349 days of solid sunshine in Kandahar. I asked the vice president of the California-based photovoltaic panel manufacturer Unisolar. It would cost about 7 million dollars, plus shipping, to put up a 1-megawatt solar spread here. Each of the ten 1-meg diesel generators USAID saw fit to bestow upon Kandahar, according to the engineers who keep them running, would go through that in about two years, including the purchase price of the unit. Bob Mengel, a crucial under-the-radar benefactor of Arghand's, began pulling his hair one day, as he showed me sample jars of beetles and large colonies of bacteria he was finding in the diesel being sent up to the gen-sets. One filter costs \$35,000.

Lack of power, especially in cities whose amenities like running water depend on it, causes private individuals much discomfort. Now think about the economic fabric of a place. Even our hand-crank seed oil press needs power, because it has a small heating unit that warms up the press head to help the oil separate from the dry material as it is being crushed by the revolving screw. Our silk packaging needs to be ironed. Our pebbles need to be shrink-wrapped. If you don't have an electric mixer, it takes three to four hours to beat a batch of soap to the right consistency by hand. Some of these tasks can be accomplished with the help of our own back-up

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solar system(s), but we don't have a huge battery bank, and three days of rain have powered us down. Note number two: Arghand has a flourishing market. Arghand is sold out of soap through the month of February. That is, soap that has not even been mixed yet, let alone molded and set out on shelves in our cellar to cure for a month, is already sold. But we can't make that soap, because we don't have any electricity, and so we can't produce the oil it's composed of.

In Kabul last spring, I was shopping for artifacts to sell at a benefit auction in Denver, and I would pause to speak to the merchants, of course. Many of the items I chose not to buy were made, by Afghans, in Pakistan. The main reason? No electricity in Afghanistan.

During my most recent trip away, I attended two glittering conferences on Afghanistan, held at two similarly luxurious hotels, in Brussels and Ottawa respectively. Exchanges were joined, about possibilities for competing with the opium economy, for example. Or about the impact of unemployment on Taliban recruiting. No one challenged the notion that a productive economy would help heal both ills. But how can there be a productive economy if there's no power? What is worth talking about, at conferences that cost several hundred thousand dollars to convene, if there is no electricity in Afghanistan?

In 2000, when twin hurricanes nearly pulled down the entire power and telephone grid in France, leaving some 7 million households without one or the other or both, technicians and engineers were thrown at the problem by the shovelful. They were called up out of retirement. They were shipped in from Belgium and the UK. And in a month, services were restored, at least on a temporary basis, to all customers. At that time I thought: what the UN needs is a rapid reaction corps for public utilities, for post-conflict societies. How can anyone think seriously about peace and reconciliation in the cold and dark? If they can't talk to anyone on the phone? And how can a country stand on its feet if it can't run the first piece of machinery? I still believe such a rapid reaction corps, and an earmarked fund for utilities infrastructure, would be one of the most useful initiatives the UN could undertake.

There is a second issue that was never raised at the conferences I attended. (Even I only breathed a word, at, I think, one of them. So mea culpa.) Inflation. A gunnysack of flour now costs 3,200 Pakistani rupees, up from 1,200 last year. (Two and sometimes three currencies are in circulation here in Kandahar, if you count dollars.) That's more than 100% inflation, for that crucial food item. Others have risen more or less in step. The recently increased salary of a policeman – frontline in the battle against the Taliban down here – is 5,000 Afghanis, which are worth slightly more than Pakistani rupees, or about \$100/month. So a sack of flour only costs half of his monthly wage. And then we talk about ending corruption.

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Tonight, Ali Shah is staying with me, the “man of the night.” He is our neighbor, and moved here from Farah. A lanky, redheaded man, Farsi-speaking, former street-corner cobbler till Arghand rescued him, a bit simple in his mind. There is a certain sound, when the spoon scrapes the bottom of the metal bowl of yoghurt, with a special urgency. It is the sound of hunger. I hear it and flinch.

Sometimes I have the feeling I’m living on a completely different wrinkle in the universe than the one people outside Afghanistan spend a lot of words talking about when discussing us.

The “situation” (halaat, in Pashtu), for those of you who I suspect are wondering is...subtle. That is, few enough flash-bangs at the moment that the women say things are much better, and the Canadians think they’re making progress. Yet I can feel the subtle changes operating under the surface. I feel them in Fayzullah’s insomnia, and Nurallah’s loss of appetite. Here’s the problem. In Fayzullah’s village in Arghandab, the village strongman sits in Ahmad Wali Karzai’s receiving room. And he is friends with the local Taliban commanders who are deployed in Urozgan and Khakrez, but have houses in the village.

And so the ordinary people feel trussed up like animals waiting for slaughter: on one side the government, on the other the Taliban, and no one can believe there are not links between them. And so Fayzullah is in a dilemma: his family bought a patch of land with two rooms on it in town. The place needs work to be habitable, and the family already went into debt just to buy the property. All the things that would be free in the countryside – eggs, flour, meat, vegetables, etc. – would have to be purchased if the family moved to town. And then, to turn their pomegranate orchard over to sharecroppers...it is almost inconceivable. I can feel the agony of indecision in him, like a luffing sail. Nurallah, when he goes home, stays inside. “I want to go out for a stroll and take a look at the vineyards,” he explains. “My heart wants to. But my mind does not give permission. If something were to happen...” And so he remains behind the walls of the family compound. This is the place where we wanted to build our facility.

In spite of all this, I had a glorious return, the gals combed the cotton in my mattresses so they were like clouds, and Fayzullah locking hands behind my back and lifting me right off the ground, while the doggies barked and jumped around us, demanding their turn.

Sarah