



Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

Sarah Chayes

Kandahar, January 24, 2008

Sayfullah reckons he's thirteen, but appraising him, the Arghand guys guess twelve. I've changed his name of course. A bony little boy, but when I put hot milk and fresh bread and some of our pomegranate jam in front of him, he says: "Ze ne kowum" – I won't do it, I'm not hungry. By now I feel comfortable enough to tease him. "Ze ne kowum, Ze ne kowum." Then a blinding grin splits his face, and after another second's hesitation, he pounces on the half-sheet of bread and next time I look it's gone.

You can tell a lot about him from the shoes he came in. Plastic and worn through and caked with mud.

I first heard about him indirectly, on a trying Skype connection to Arghand from Paris in late December; Qasim (also a pseudonym) was shouting something about an improvised bomb going off near his house, Canadian vehicles were hit and the soldiers started shooting. It was the second incident like that since I had been gone. Things were getting worse around his neighborhood in Arghandab, just as I expected, was what I registered.

Sayfullah registered it this way. He and his father and his little seven-year-old brother were in the field; it was near sunset. They were building "bridges." That means, mounding up little embankments around a square of land, so it can be flooded with water and the water will stay in place and soak into the earth. They were going to plant wheat. Sayfullah heard the sound of the Canadian vehicles approaching before he saw them. His father had taught him: as soon as you catch sight of the foreigners' tanks, run. "Father, father, shouldn't we run?" He'd just gotten the question out, when an explosion ripped through the air. "I saw fire. And I saw the tank fly into the sky," his arms flailing upwards to illustrate. He tried to get his father to leave again. "My father cursed me. He said we have shovels in our hands, no one will hurt us. You are empty-handed, you run, and don't come back."

Sayfullah had put about 20 yards between him and his father when he heard the shooting. He looked back over his shoulder. His father and little brother were prone, in the mud of the watering field. He kept running, starting to cry. He dove through the shattered doorway of an old ruin. He heard someone coming and threw himself on the ground. It was a neighbor. "What are you doing, Sayfullah?" Relief flooded the boy. "Oh, it's you. I thought you were the Americans." He tried to rub his face, sitting up. "They shot my father and my brother." The neighbor comforted the boy: no, his father had only hit the ground for cover, the same way he had just done, everything was fine.



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It was a lie, of course, as Sayfullah learned the next morning, when he went home after sleeping at the neighbor's house. "He wouldn't let me go outside at all. I had to go to the bathroom, but he told me I couldn't go outside, there were soldiers. Then later in the night, I went to the bathroom and I said my prayers and I went to sleep." When he reached his house in the morning, the bodies were laid out in the back of a station wagon, waiting for burial.

The family was sharecropping on Qasim's land. Qasim is allowing the widow and Sayfullah and his three tiny brothers to remain in the house he had given them, and last week he bought them some winter jackets. The community is trying to help out.

"The Canadians should investigate when they do something like this," he says, tone accusatory. "They should come back and find out who did they kill, who didn't they kill, was it Taliban or not Taliban. And they should give the family some money. What are they supposed to eat, now? If the Canadians had done that, had helped the household, we would believe it was an accident. But like this, there is no way people can think these things aren't deliberate. If they don't come back afterwards and ask a few questions at least."

Qasim, canny old fighter, had seen the Taliban. There were four explosions that evening, and a different bomb blew up in his part of the village. He saw two men running away from a site some distance from the road. The next morning he checked the place out. It was the head of a well: in Arghandab, a depression is dug into the ground, almost like a small cellar open to the sky, with steps leading down to the floor. That floor is where the well is drilled. The planters of the mine that blew up nearest Qasim had been hiding there (logically) not standing out in plain sight. "It wasn't a wireless remote," Qasim added the detail. "I found the little trench they had dug to run the wire to the road."

A Canadian journalist was present at the telling of this story; in fact, it was at her behest that we had asked Qasim to bring little Sayfullah over. And so word reached back to the Canadian contingent. First came an odd request that I stop by to talk to a lawyer on the PRT who handles land claims. But the manufacturers got their titles to the land they bought in the industrial zone, I thought. That's ancient history.

April Inglis wanted to talk about Sayfullah, not land. Meeting in her office on the PRT, I found out there actually is a compensation procedure in case of damage to life, limb, or property caused by the Canadian contingent. And when in doubt, plainly compassionate April compensates. The problem with the procedure – as with so many procedures that we internationals have established here – is that it is reactive, not proactive. How is some village widow with four underage children supposed to know there are office hours on the PRT in the big city on Wednesday morning from 9 till 12? The result is that the opportunists get more than their share of the take.

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The next step in this procedure was to take young Sayfullah out to KAF, the big base outside town, to talk to Military Police investigators and the Judge Advocate General. That day he showed up at the cooperative in white vinyl sneakers about five sizes too big. We drove to the base. Just try to imagine what that metropolis of barbed wire and military vehicles and stacked cargo containers and plywood buildings must have looked like to Sayfullah with his mud-brick village eyes. At the foot of the wooden stairway leading up to the Canadian contingent headquarters was a knot of officers, including Brigadier General Guy Laroche, the commanding officer of Taskforce Kandahar. I introduced Qasim and Sayfullah. “Bonjour jeune homme,” came the warm greeting, or something to that effect. General Laroche, excellent guy, knew the story, and gripped the boy’s hand and touched his head. I explained as we mounted the steps, that this small, unassuming, and manifestly kind man was commander of all the Canadian troops in Kandahar. “A very good man,” I repeated to Qasim. “It’s obvious,” he replied. “You can tell from the look of him.” Their very survival requires Afghans to be good judges of character.

But, as we sat in the JAG’s office waiting for the MPs, Sayfullah’s growing terror at all the uniforms was making him physically cringe.

The process took most of the day, because Qasim and Sayfullah had to talk to the police investigators first – without me, which worried them. But they were relieved to learn that the police translator was Canadian, not local. All the local national translators who work in Kandahar are wired in to power groups, and it can be lethal to communicate through them. I explained to Qasim: It’s their law. The interview with the police and the one with the lawyer have to be separate, because the police have to be impartial, while the lawyer takes a side. And that’s why I can’t be present at the police interview either. They know I’m on your side. Qasim was impressed.

He came back even more impressed. “The Canadians are such kind people!! Very kind people. They are really polite.” Perhaps, now, I thought, he understands it was an accident. Officers were practically lining up to shower Sayfullah with affection and gifts. Like me, they were entirely won over by his poise and clarity. The JAG: “How do you know your father was shot with a gun?” Sayfullah, finger on the back of his head: “The bullet went in here and it came out over here,” feeling for the side of his forehead, above the right eye.

JAG: “How many vehicles did you see pass your field?”

Sayfullah: “Four. Three normal ones, and one big one, a recovery vehicle.”

JAG: “When you had a chance to look at your father’s body, was there anyone else around?”



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Sayfullah: “They were in the car, my father and my brother. And I pushed aside my brother’s cap to see his head. And I moved my father’s turban.”

Sarah: “But were other people there with you?”

Sayfullah, counting on his fingers: “There were my two maternal uncles and my paternal uncle and Shams, and his son, and a few first cousins on my father’s side... maybe ten or twelve people.”

In his place I would have remembered only blur.

It was pretty clear, from even a cursory investigation of the events as I had described them to April at the PRT, that Sayfullah’s story checked out. The JAG said something about soldiers thinking they saw two people running away with rocket launchers. That would have been the shovels. And so, the Canadians are going to provide the family some material compensation – remains only to determine the amount, and wait till the widow is through her forty-day mourning period so she can come out and accept the money herself. I explained she would be in a burqa. The JAG wanted to know if she couldn’t fold it back from her face at least to talk, even if not for pictures. I shook my head. I said it would be even better if a female officer gave her the money.

In the meantime, hearts overflowing, the Canadians filled two huge black garbage bags with soccer balls, school bags (though there’s no school out in Sayfullah’s village) four or five kids’ parka sets, a dozen kites. Sayfullah’s grin was just massive.

But here is the point of this whole letter. The breathtaking lack of situational awareness on the part of the bulk of international forces here, as demonstrated by this shower of gifts. One officer made us wait five minutes, though I had said we were late getting back, while he ran to his office and fetched one single coloring book and a box of crayons.

When the police took a turn at me, just before we left, they asked: “Do you think there are any Taliban in that village?” There had been one improvised mine in November. This December incident was sophisticated. One bomb had damaged a vehicle around noon. The convoy Sayfullah saw was the recovery expedition, three light armored vehicles and a big truck to tow the damaged one back. Four separate explosions hit this convoy. Yeah there are Taliban in the village. And Qasim knows exactly who they are. Pals of the village headman, who hangs out with provincial authorities. Three of his sharecroppers are Taliban commanders in three different districts. The day before we went out on base, there was a big sweep of the village. A friend of Qasim’s was sitting with some of these “bad guys” when the call came in from the village



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headman to make themselves scarce, the Americans were coming. The sweep swept up the innocent. To nail the guilty, Qasim keeps repeating, you need intelligence.

In other words, Qasim, like all Arghand Cooperative members, but even more so, is in acute danger. It simply did not occur to the Canadians that their kind gifts could be booby-trapped. That is, the soccer balls and winter parkas would mark out Sayfullah, and therefore Qasim, as having been on base. And if he went to the base, certain people would presume, Qasim would surely be passing information.

We had to send those gifts home with Sayfullah under cover of darkness, in a local car. The officers told him to give some to all of his friends. But he can't. It would be too dangerous. The next day, I asked him what he had done with the parkas. "We hid them," he said. "I think it is better if we don't show these things all at once. A little later, maybe I will take one out and use it."

Sarah