



# Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

**Sarah Chayes**

Kandahar, March 15, 2008

It's that moment of grace in Kandahar. The air is warm but not hot (our dogs are shedding by the fistful); the Arghand women are at last freed from the prison of their work room and can spread out outside to crack their almonds. The flies haven't woken up yet, and the drag on power from heaters in the winter and fans in the summer is not there, so, miracle, we enjoy several hours of electricity a day.

This causes the women to say: God be thanked, the situation is a little better. And, on the surface, it feels so. We go about our business. The cooperative is humming, soap production up by 50%, the place just about ship-shape when I arrived this time. I am beyond proud of our little team, which continues to generate about the only good-news story in southern Afghanistan, the news getting better month by month. By my left hand are stacked 11 boxes full of soap ready to ship. I can hear Nurallah taping another in the next room.

This sanguine mood is supported by a communication I recently received from a high-ranking officer of the NATO forces in Afghanistan. What he was "getting from Kandahar," he wrote, was:

"Better than this time last year. And what I get in intel. about the country as a whole is better than last year. We have a more capable force in the South this spring and summer. We see some slow improvement in the Afghan police. There are some areas that I am watching closely and they mostly are in the East.... We are not getting enough help from the neighbors either east or west. A Kandahari gave me some good reports on Qarimullah last week. He is not his father, but he seems to be maturing."

Frankly, my friends, the letter left me gob-smacked. I shared it with Nurallah. He said: "Deliberately they don't want to see what's happening?"

It's not that what this officer says isn't true. The international troop strength is increasing, with the announced arrival of the Marines, and hints of a French contribution; there's a good incoming Canadian command, not to mention a general in charge of the southern zone whom I like. More importantly, lip service being paid to governance is getting louder, and has spawned a litter of working groups.

Here are some examples of why this is not the whole picture, however. Why the mood – despite what the women say – is clenched tense, and inexorably, increasingly so, each and every day.



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In a village about 20 minutes outside of town in Zhari district, where all the fighting was in 2006, and still a rough place, residents decided they needed to clean and expand their irrigation channel. They felt compelled to ask permission from the local Taliban. The negotiation went this way: the village sent to the Taliban, requesting a meeting. They were given a place and a time. The delegation of elders went to that place, where the intermediary was waiting for them. When the delegation arrived, the intermediary made a call on his cell phone, and was given a different location. He led the elders there. They explained to the Taliban, commander that they were going to work on their irrigation channel, and please not to burn the bulldozer they'd be using. The Taliban, said: if you guarantee that you'll rent a private bulldozer, and not use an NGO one, or one lent out by the agriculture department, we will allow you to work. But so help us, if it turns out the bulldozer is a government one, you'll die. The commander wrote out a safe-conduct for the bulldozer, good for a huge chunk of territory – from where they were standing all the way to the gates of the Kandahar, about ten miles away.

The owner of the machinery, incidentally, was not impressed by the safe-conduct, and wanted a deposit from the village, which it could not afford to pay, so the work went forward by hand.

The point is, the village asked the Taliban for permission to do their public works, though they have a district chief and a police force and half a dozen new Canadian checkpoints in their very district. That is, there is a kind of shadow Taliban government already beginning to hold sway, in and amongst, but just under the surface of the Karzai government structures. And the power of this shadow government is increasing, with hardly a shot being fired.

Some more examples: people, including our Nurallah, are taking their girls out of school. In Arghandab, in a village that has heretofore been calm, the pavement on the road that runs along the banks of a canal was broken up. The village fixed it. It was broken again, in two places, and a warning put out against whomsoever might fix it again. It lies broken, ready to receive an improvised bomb. The Taliban have issued warnings to the cell phone companies, to shut down service at night, because people were calling in tips to hot lines set up by the Canadians, and effective strikes were launched against Taliban groups. The cell phone companies knuckled under. A couple of towers set alight, and now there's no service in about 1/3 of Afghanistan, apart from two or three cities, after dark. Taliban are also taxing people, calling them up, for example, and telling them to buy a phone card, and scratch the place where the PIN number is hidden, and read the number over the phone. Then the Talib can use that PIN number to put more units in his account.

This is really what I was predicting last October. Remember I talked about a trickle of people moving out of outlying areas? One of our cooperative members has left Arghandab. His family made it through the Jihad, the Mujahideen period, and Taliban rule, ensconced in the protective

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enclave of their pomegranate thicket. He has had to move because two unknown men with guns were lying in wait on his path to work, early in the morning when only he is abroad. Thank God he had night duty at Arghand. It just kills me to think of this village family, used to their stout house amidst the pomegranates, on the bank of an irrigation channel that the kids could splash and play in before a midsummer nap, now constrained to the sordid life of a couple of rooms and no bathroom or kitchen in a nasty newly developing neighborhood on the fringes of town. And he isn't the only one. People are packing their bundles and moving steadily into town. Nurallah, sunny, bubbly Nurallah, who was taking English and computer courses, now sees no future at all for Afghanistan, just a slow, inexorable slide back into war.

This whole phenomenon of loss of hope and behavior modification is hard to discern, because it doesn't show up in any of the concrete metrics tabulated and studied by Westerners. And so, I decided not to waste my breath any more trying to make that NATO officer grasp the picture. He clearly wants to believe the metrics.

Let's look at another point in his letter. That "Qarimullah" is maturing. My correspondent means Karimullah, the son of the late Mullah Naqib, who was engineered into position as his father's successor by the Karzai brothers and their friend the governor and a few lackeys inside Mullah Naqib's Alokozai tribe. (See Notes from the Field November 1, 2007.) Some weeks ago, I heard from a Western official who had been at a formal function at the governor's residence how Karimullah was treated. "Like a rag doll," the official said. "The governor would call him over like he was whistling a dog, and when he was through with him, shoo him back to his place." The Alokozai tribe is the proudest in the region. It is made up of warlike people, whose blood is hot and who wear their hearts, very exposed, on their sleeves. No way will they accept such treatment – of a decent young man, who has been put in an impossible position.

The result has been a falling away of the tribe from this imposed leadership. Huge swathes of it have gone over to the Taliban. Khakrez district, the home of my late friend Police Chief Akrem Khakrezwal, is now in Taliban hands, all the Alokozais there going along. This tribe was among the most loyal to President Karzai. Its defection is not out of ideological affinity with the Taliban, but out of disgust with the government. In the Alokozai fiefdom of Arghandab, as is indicated above, improvised bombs have become commonplace where there were never any before.

A more constructive way some Alokozais have dealt with this situation has been to invigorate their tribal council of elders, which had grown weak under the somewhat authoritarian domination of Mullah Naqib. I visited with about 30 members of this council in late January. There were half a dozen tribes represented, and professions ranging from teacher to trader to farmer to mullah. A process was underway to constitute a "greater Kandahar shura," with



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proportional membership from all the tribes, to serve, said these men, “as a mirror for the government, to show how the people should be treated, how their problems solved, how a government should work.” A prerequisite, for the men I was speaking with, was that no member of local, provincial, or national government, elected or appointed, should have a seat on this greater Kandahar council. Well, what do I learn when I’m away in February, but somehow Qayum Karzai has engineered his way into directorship, with one of the famously corrupt public prosecutors as another officer, and various of the pliant folk mentioned above by his side.

In other words, once again, the legitimate efforts of the people to obtain representation and a voice, to construct some mechanism that could provide recourse against the depredations of this government, has been thwarted. When people are again and again confronted by a lack of legitimate political alternatives to oppression, they tend to radicalize.

The way Afghanistan reminds me of Vietnam is this: no build-up in force strength, or stronger policing, can create security when its mission is to prop up a government that has been repudiated by the people.

Sarah