



Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

Sarah Chayes

Kandahar, May 16-21, 2005

Dear All:

I missed a fabulous picture: goats' hair tents by the side of the road, the mountains in the background, and across the foreground in front of the tents, the nomads' black flock of goats, still sleeping in the morning sun. It was on another trip down from Kabul. Our seed oil press finally arrived; it only took us a full day to obtain the eight or ten requisite signatures on the customs form to get it released. In fact, one of the signatures was missing, the woman refused to sign if we didn't come up with a tip. We watched several hundred dollars in small bills change hands while we were waiting in the customs office. The trick for extracting the money, if you are a civil servant, is to be too busy to get to the person's papers until he comes across. Usually there's no wait. A kiss on the cheek and a handshake across the counter, and the money is openly handed over, and openly dropped into a jacket pocket. The root cause of this practice, of course, is low salaries. But once the customs agents cross the line, there seems to be no restraint. The corker was watching the guy who helped the agents land their jobs in the customs office comes around in the afternoon for his cut of their take!

Not only did we not play this game, but we even went to the length of walking out of the office, driving all the way into the middle of the bazaar, through the impossible Kabul traffic, dodging our way through the used-electronic-goods-turns-butcher-stalls-turns-outdoor-vegetable-market bazaar, then crossing the bridge to the money-changers' bazaar, where, by trading our \$100 for small bills -- 10 and 20 Afghani notes -- we got 50.01 AFA/\$ instead of the 49 AFA/\$ rate the folks at the airport were trying to beat us down to, for payment of our \$200 customs bill. Darned if we were going to let ourselves be robbed THAT way! I do this, I confess. I shop around to save 5 AFA (10 cents) on a plastic bucket to store our tea in. Not because the extra time it takes isn't worth at least as much, but because I save face that way. The folks at the airport "bank" -- a rather grimy office where all of the employees were eating their lunch when we got back -- were surprised and amused that I had picked up on their little ruse. "Wow, she knows everything," they marveled.

But forgive me, I digress.

Normally I would not be bombarding you with another missive so shortly after the last one. But because of the recent demonstrations in Afghanistan, the place has been in the news, I suspect, for the first time in a while. And, while I am not privy to the coverage you may be seeing or hearing, I have a hunch that some of the context for these demonstrations may have been lacking.

These are the demonstrations that were supposedly sparked by Newsweek coverage of US prison

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guards flushing a copy of the Qur'an down a toilet. When I heard it was university students leading the initial marches in the city of Jalalabad, I was immediately suspicious. In Kandahar, about 1/3 of the students at the so-called university (I wish I could attach my picture of the library) are from Pakistan. It is an absurdity. Even a talker like me is at a loss for words to describe the inferiority of the "education" available at Kandahar University. Why would anyone come from Pakistan here to study? My original assumption was that many of these students are spies. I still suspect that to be the case, but the recent demonstrations indicated an even more obvious purpose to their presence here. They are a kind of large sleeper cell of ready manpower for agitation, at Pakistan's behest, which affords the Pakistani government plausible deniability.

My point is this: I do not believe these events were fundamentally and originally to do with the alleged desecration of the Qur'an at Guantanamo Bay. They were a reaction to President Karzai's announcement last week of an ongoing strategic partnership with the United States (read, continued presence of US troops in Afghanistan). This is a decision that mightily disgruntles a number of Afghanistan's neighbors. And according to Kabul Police Chief Zabib Akrem, who successfully defused demonstrations in the capital, the Iranian and Russian diplomatic communities were quite active in trying to stir up matters there.

Another telling detail, by way of comparison: In Zabul Province, one of the most notoriously fundamentalist in the whole country, where a number of Afghan employees of international organizations were recently killed, a no-go RED zone for the UN, there was a demonstration, but very late: on Friday. It was peaceful, short, and led by dignified local religious leaders. I suspect that one was NOT manipulated, that it was genuinely sparked by locals' understanding of the Qur'an desecration scandal; but that it would never have been launched spontaneously had residents not been barraged with news of the uprisings in other cities.

All of this said, it is clear that we Americans ought really to try not to provide the kind of pretext that can be capitalized on in the volatile situation now obtaining in the Muslim world. It seems to me almost irrelevant whether the exact details of the story Newsweek reported are correct or not. Numerous well-documented instances of similar actions exist. The kind of needlessly insulting and abusive behavior that some representatives of the US government have been guilty of over the past few years is a national security risk, in my view. And it certainly makes the task of any of us trying to do anything constructive on the ground that much harder and more perilous. As do the other exasperating mistakes made by US troops here, in particular and still, the exclusive teaming up with warlord proxies, who in their off-hours make the lives of ordinary Afghans miserable, and who manipulate the US troops into fighting their personal battles for them, under the cover of so-called Taliban-hunting. (Forgive me for sounding like a broken record.) As the French would put it, such mistakes "open a boulevard" for troublemakers of various stripes.



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So, that off my chest, I can get back to Arghand matters. The trip to Kabul made, Karimullah and I put the seed oil press in the back seat of the car Zabit Akrem lent us, fastened it in with both seat-belts -- thing was in a wooden crate that made it look precisely like a box of ammunition or a rocket launcher -- and enjoyed another uneventful ride back down to Kandahar. A hecatomb of butterflies was caught in the radiator grate; and there was, miraculously, almost NO dust on the road back down. Instead of barren wasteland on either side, wheat fields. I still can't get over it. Of course, there were also several fields exploded in a riot of pink and white poppy blossoms.

It took a little doing (the press didn't come with a diagram, and heck if I knew what the press cylinder was, or the press head, or how to fit the sickle wrench into the socket to tighten same, or that the nozzle had to be fitted inside the press head before same was tightened, etc., etc.) but, after multiple telephone calls to the sales rep. Peter Matthies in Germany, oh my gosh we have produced our first batch of almond oil. It took the better part of two days with hammers to open 4.4 kg. of almonds (the standard local measure, called a "man"), and they produced just under .6 liters of oil. That felt a tad insignificant given the time and effort, and I think it costs out at twice the US price for the same commodity...here's hoping we can find some cheaper almonds, once we start dealing directly with farmers. We took turns with the hand crank, one turning, two holding down the press. We're meeting with a carpenter tomorrow to build us a good solid work table.

Best wishes to you all,

Sarah