



# Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

**Sarah Chayes**

Kandahar, May 21, 2006

Dear friends and cyber-neighbors:

I hear yours has been a bit of a grey and weepy spring...

Here the 110 degree days follow on each other's heels with brutal regularity -- we halt work at 2:30 in the afternoon and crawl into corners for refuge. But a summer storm of sorts has broken at last, so I feel able to communicate some of the details.

Perhaps you have been reading or hearing about unprecedented fighting in the Afghan south. In fact, if unprecedented, the events have certainly not come without warning. They merely constitute the latest stage in what has been an inexorable process.

Seven or eight weeks ago, Abd al-Ahad brought me a story from the village over from his. Kindly note that the field of fire this time is Panjwayi district, precisely where we have planted our roses. Abd al-Ahad's village is on the border of that district, a little back from the main road leading northwestward out to Herat -- a loyal village nestled amidst rather dicier ones, including Sing-i Sar, where Mullah Omar used to preach. So one morning at breakfast when we exchange news, he tells the story of a few "Taliban" who hijacked a couple of cars from a de-mining agency and made off with them, leaving the main road on the track that leads past his village. The de-miners went to the district police, who gave chase, and -- partly thanks to a village boy who warned the Taliban struggling with a stuck car -- the Taliban beat the police off. Then, as curious villagers gathered, the "insurgents" passed out their telephone number: "If the soldiers ever come around, call us and let us know. We have 300 fighters between here and Nar-i Seraj in Helmand Province, and we want to take the soldiers on," they said.

Well, I was pretty stunned. What a role reversal: I thought it was supposed to be the government and the International Coalition forces hunting Taliban, not the other way around!

We didn't hear the next chapter in the story until later, but I'll put it here where it comes chronologically. It seems -- according to village stories, unverified, but interesting for collective psychology at least -- that by about a week later, villagers in Sing-i Sar had caught on to the ruse of a fellow who was passing himself off as an opium trafficker, but was in fact using his "prospecting visits" as a means to gather info in order to tip off the authorities. After two or three visits by this prospective buyer followed by a raid on a field, the villagers began to smell a rat. So they rang the number on the Taliban calling card, and asked what to do. The Taliban instructed them to arrange another meeting with the snitch, while they would lie in wait. They caught him, and told him to call in the police as was his wont. The result of this ambush was a

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small clash that night, followed by a pitched battle between government forces and the Taliban the next day. This about 10 minutes outside of Kandahar city, on the seamed cement road I have travelled dozens of times, right next door to Abd al-Ahad's village which we had just gone out to visit a couple of weeks previous. The Maywand district police chief was killed, among others. Lack of coordination between Kandahar police (always on the front lines, if occasionally lacking professionalism) and the National Army (always dragging its feet) allowed just about all the "insurgents" to get away.

I repeat, I am not able to guarantee the veracity of the opium story here; I include it because it is what the local villagers think happened. And what is important in this context is the role or image of the Taliban as "protectors" of ordinary people against government policies they see as hostile to their interests. The issues at stake here are not ideological.

Then we entered a month that felt like the slow-motion gathering of a storm. I was weighed down with such a feeling of foreboding and hopelessness...not helped in the least by several glaring examples of the incurable corruption of local officials here, their contempt for their countrymen. Somehow my blood pressure managed to rise yet again over these incidents, while my heart was sinking.

Meanwhile -- again, we weren't to learn this till later -- the Taliban went around to the villagers in that same area, and told them to evacuate, because there was going to be more fighting soon. Quoth the locals: we are just about to get our opium harvest in, couldn't you hold off just a few weeks? Agreed. And so it was that maybe ten days ago, the Taliban were back, going door to door, telling people to pack up and leave, war was going to start. Thus, once again, the endlessly repeated routine in this country: of tying bundles, packing terrified children into corners of vehicles or telling them to grip tight to the roof-racks, and families started leaving the area, to bunk with friends or neighbors out of the line of fire. Abd al-Ahad said every house in his native village had two or three "guest" families staying over...the narrow lanes were full of unfamiliar children.

Last Tuesday, Abd al-Ahad and Nurallah went out to the village to begin setting up one of the two solar water pumps. Abd al-Ahad's older brother, who lives out there on the family land, is a slender, dignified, thoughtful gentleman, who did our roses proud. I'm thrilled to have him be the recipient of one of these pumps. But it was a good thing the guys didn't go out on Monday. Taliban had strung mines along the road like stones on a string -- the guys counted about a dozen holes on the road, where the charges had been dug up and carried off after no suitable target drove by. This is the road that, when we reached it on our recent trip out there with some Canadian journalists, Abd al-Ahad had heaved a visible sigh of relief. "Now we're safe," he had said. But last Monday, Taliban sat on either side with detonators for those mines, waiting for a



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"government car" to pass. Our red pick-up truck counts. Thank God the guys went Tuesday instead. Villagers -- in this Popalzai hamlet, fiercely loyal to tribesman President Karzai -- were idly passing the time with dozens of Taliban lounging in the gardens and sleeping in the local mosques.

The clash came Wednesday night. For the first time since Kosovo in 1999, I could hear bombing -- a deeper rumble swelling out under the sound of airplane engines. Apparently the coordination was better this time than it had been in April: Canadians were on the ground with Afghan security forces, and the air cover was prompt. The toll was some 100 Taliban dead, according to people who eyeballed the two big piles of corpses -- men and many boy-soldiers, killed in the bombing mostly. The villages were empty, so civilian casualties were almost nill, thank God. I heard about one woman and two children. A Canadian captain was killed when a rocket hit her personnel carrier. All who knew her said she was the bravest of the whole company.

And so did the storm break, in a clap of thunder. Such engagements till now have been played out in isolated mountain ravines hours' drive up tortuous tracks to the north of here. The night before last, one of the small aftershocks took place well inside town, when a Taliban group ambushed a personnel carrier returning from the fray.

So far, the results and implications of this battle are inconclusive. 100 casualties is a lot. But villagers -- counting the number of mosques filled by visiting "insurgents," judge the total number to have been over 500. Word is those who escaped headed for Arghandab of the leafy orchards, or else westwards to Helmand; others simply went to ground, traveling the district in groups of five or six. So the season may not yet be at an end.

On the other hand, it may be that this battle will remind people of the real costs of playing both ends against the middle, of flirting with violent opposition. It may seem an easy way to register a protest vote with the admittedly dissipated governing authorities -- to offer visiting Taliban a loaf of bread and a place to sleep at night. But when these little comforts transform themselves into orders to evacuate the children, to bone-charring days away from the village and the ability to water the lovingly-husbanded and now parching trees, people's ardor may cool down. I hear that Sanzari village elders -- another hamlet in this zone -- have gathered and vowed not to allow anyone to enter their village again with warlike purposes -- government or Talib.

May this be an omen.

Sarah