



Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

Sarah Chayes

Kandahar, June 15, 2006

Dear friends:

This morning's blast sounded something like boxes of books tumbling off a shelf to the floor of an attic upstairs. Except we don't have an attic. The usual concussion was missing -- that sudden puff of air, colliding into all your membranes, bringing a rattle to the windows that reaches your ears just a split second later. And so, we judged, the explosion must have been quite far away -- so as not to have stirred the air around us... but quite big -- to have made such a noise. The poor Arghand women; they keep finding themselves caught in the maelstrom. This time, they were on their way to work when the injured started streaming past them -- in taxis, in private cars, in ambulances; "with their clothes blown off, just covered in someone's shawl. What a scene it was!" Zarghona, whom we nickname "wrestler" for her hefty build, was, eyes wide and shiny, near tears.

The story I related in the last note was, of course, incomplete. With the dust settled to a degree -- and now kicking up again in motes -- it seems time for something in the way of a sequel.

I wrote that note before the final famous event in that particular barrage of events had taken place: the deaths of about 30 villagers by US close air support in a running battle with the Taliban. I may surprise you. Hardly anyone here shed a tear -- apart, of course, from the family-members of the dead, and a few colluding neighbors. The reason is this: everyone in Kandahar knew the village that was struck had a "foot on two watermelons," to use the local expression. That is, was playing both ends against the middle. We have two rose plantations in that village. WE knew.

The Arghand women happened to go to the hospital the next morning, before news of the raid was out (why I say they keep ending up in the middle of it), because Sadiqa's husband was dying of diabetes. They came back fired up. "The place was full of wounded people. In the halls, on the floors, everywhere. With their black turbans out to here! I wanted to spit on them," said Ayisa fiercely. Zarghona: "They write notes and leave them in mosques at night, telling people to separate from the government. Then as soon as they get injured they come running to the hospital. But whose hospital?! Not their hospital! Our hospital: the government hospital. The doctors should refuse to treat them."

I explained that doctors have taken an oath. They can't refuse.

The men, let me add, are a little less...clear-cut in their sentiments, as though they haven't -- somehow -- been sufficiently through the crucible to be burned down to elemental realities, as

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the women have. The men are...nervous of the consequences, should any side in the current dispute be made "unhappy." But believe me. Everyone in Kandahar knew why those people died -- everyone saw it as the more or less inevitable result of showing hospitality to the Taliban. People here make distinctions. A wedding party torn to pieces because intel. indicates that a "big fish" is there is very different from villagers who actively aid and abet getting caught in a firefight. Weren't you a little startled, in retrospect, that 30 civilians dead here produced no reaction, whereas six crushed in a car accident in Kabul sent the city into a full day of violent chaos? Several people put it starkly: that bombing was the best thing that could have happened.

What they mean is, a high water mark may have been touched and receded from, at least temporarily.

It turns out that the fight I described in my last missive was supposed to be IT. It was going to be the offensive that would capture the districts immediately west of Kandahar, and from there the city itself. It was to be the culmination of the build-up I've been watching for the past four years.

Quetta, the capital of Pakistani Baluchistan where Taliban leaders and their madrassa-harbored canon-fodder normally strut around, was emptied out: the whole crowd packed up and sent across the border for "jihad." This sort of thing has happened before: a camp or two, a large madrassa, would close its doors and put its students in the street. They could leave to do jihad in Afghanistan, in which case here was some spending money, or they could just leave. No third option. But this time, it wasn't just a few training-grounds. It was the entire town that shooed its be-turbaned guests across the border.

It seems the "insurgents" may have actually come to believe their own propaganda. What they told the inhabitants of villages they planned to turn into their front line -- in Panjwayi and Zhari Districts along the main road to Herat about 15 minutes west and north of town -- is that, well, you know it as well as we do: the Americans are kind of on our side. (For more on that, see Notes from the Field, Oct. 31 2005, or my article in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist.) That eye in the sky isn't up there any more. Too expensive. They're not bombing us. And you KNOW we can beat the locals. And so on. And so the people, ever sensitive to the balance of power, and seeking above all their own material preservation (I repeat, this is a PRACTICAL struggle, not an ideological one) doggedly packed up their belongings, their frightened children, and went to camp out with relatives in villages away from the line of fire. Some who may have harbored sympathies in the insurgent direction, but kept them under wraps till now, probably felt it safe to stand up and be counted.

But the insurgents were wrong. They got pounded, from the air. And so did about thirty members of families that had put them up in their village madrassa and cooked a nice meal for them. After



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a fire-fight out in the open, beset from ground and air, the Taliban dashed for the homes of their hosts. "They came into our house, they were shooting from the roof!" wept a teenage boy interviewed on the radio, who had lost his entire family in the heavy return fire from an Apache helicopter.

"These villagers are DONKEYS," spat plump Zarghona, after taking in the debris from that night piled on the hospital floors. "After everything we've been through in the last twenty-five years, they've forgotten what war is? They've forgotten the blood, the death, the women torn apart, the children?"

And it seems to some degree they had; or else they had been lulled by the insurgents' persuasive arguments; or their vows that if you give us dinner tonight, we'll do our fighting somewhere else; or by memories of 1994, when the Taliban waltzed in here, hardly a shot fired. Or, of course, they may in part have been intimidated into providing shelter.

The three days of fighting quickly disabused them of any notion that doing so was going to be the easy way out of the terrible conundrum they face. It wasn't just the dead and injured. It was the orchards: these aren't field crops that can grow again next year. These are trees, lovingly nurtured through years of fighting and drought -- patrimony and the very seat of a man's honor, or else new saplings planted in the hopeful thought that Afghanistan's long nightmare might be over. And it was the packing up of families -- how could this be happening to us AGAIN. This was what cut Arghand's Abd al-Ahad to the quick. The sight of the families jammed into cars headed away from harm and home. But it was also the deaths.

And because of all these things, people realized with a shock that it wasn't such a cheap protest vote after all, giving space to the Taliban.

And that is why I think President Karzai's message was just a little off, when in a surprise visit he flew down here to comfort the wounded. His arrival certainly did inject some needed courage into Kandahar, which had been feeling abandoned to its fate. The guts required to come impressed many. Especially men. Not so much the women. Still, it was surely good and kind to show sympathy to the wounded in the hospital, to lay a hand on their brows. But in President Karzai's place, I would have adjusted the message slightly. My sympathy -- my understanding that most villagers are just desperately trying to steer a course between Cylla and Charibdis -- would have been tempered by the exhortation: please understand. We are in a struggle for the life of this country. It is a violent and deadly struggle. If you give space to the enemies of this country, there is every chance that you will get hurt. So please, keep your distance from them.



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I would also have showered blessings on some tender shoots that have been forced by the pressure to sprout at last from the ground.

For what happened in the immediate aftermath of the fighting is that village and district elders gathered to try to find a way out. The solution they came up with is typically Afghan. It is at once a glimmer of hope, and a terrible indictment of nearly 5 years of "nation-building." In effect, they said to government and to Taliban: a plague on both your houses. They said they could take care of their own security, thank you very much, and they didn't want anyone from either of the warring parties in their town. In the case of Panjwayi district, the 120 or so elders went further. They sent a message to the insurgents saying in effect: we don't have a dog in this fight. If you and the government want to do battle, that's y'all's business. But don't get us involved. The elders told the insurgents they could have any piece of land in the district they wanted for a battlefield. Just ask. "Taloqan? We'll empty it for you. Zingawat?" But in return, the fighters had to promise to stay put. Not wander from village to village, not hide out among civilians when the fighting got hot.

The up side of this development, and why I would have vocally supported it were I the president, is that it is the stirrings of a reinvestment by ordinary Afghans in their destiny -- a taking of themselves in hand. For, believe me, if the Afghan population decides it doesn't want insurgents infesting the countryside, the countryside will be.

S.