

RELEASE IN FULL

From: Sullivan, Jacob J <SullivanJJ@state.gov>
Sent: Monday, March 8, 2010 10:06 AM
To: H
Subject: FW: From the FT: U.S. civilians battle to help Afghanistan

FYI

From: Jones, Paul W
Sent: Monday, March 08, 2010 6:11 AM
To: Sullivan, Jacob J
Subject: Fw: From the FT: U.S. civilians battle to help Afghanistan

Jake

Very worthwhile article from a couple of days ago. If S hasn't already seen, she might appreciate it. Karl and folks in Kabul are quite pleased with it. Paul

From: Simon, Jessica L
To: SSRAP_Expanded; Philadelphia, Carlton A; Campbell, Piper; Crowley, Philip J; Chitre, Nanda S; (U) Toner, Mark C; Duguid, Gordon K; USAID Press Officers
Sent: Sun Mar 07 21:55:50 2010
Subject: FW: From the FT: U.S. civilians battle to help Afghanistan

From Emb Kabul:

Hey, guys! Just wanted to flag this story that includes some good work by our civilians in the Arghandab. Thanks! -CH

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/894535f4-272c-11df-b84e-00144feabdc0.html>

US civilians battle to help Afghanistan

By Matthew Green

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US State Department representative Christopher Harich (top left) and Kevin Melton flank Haji Abdul Jabar as they discuss the restoration of a religious monument

Each morning this winter, Haji Abdul Jabar has packed a flask of home-brewed green tea for work. It's not frugality; he's trying to avoid being poisoned. You can't be too careful: before leaving the house, he also straps a Smith & Wesson 9mm handgun into a holster secreted in the depths of his robes. Seized with occasional fits of passion, Jabar has been known to whip out the gun during meetings. He may be jumpy, but tactics like this are not entirely out of place in his line of work: as district governor, the 65-year-old has an unenviable task – of wresting the Arghandab River Valley, one of the most dangerous places in Afghanistan, from the Taliban.

Viewed from the roof of Jabar's district headquarters, the sweep of the valley is at once beautiful – bleakly majestic – and charged with menace. A distant range of low, dun-coloured hills defines the valley's opposite flank. Orchards of pomegranate trees, their branches stripped bare by the cold, line the banks of a river meandering across the valley floor, dividing the east side of Arghandab from the west.

The east is where Jabar's office is perched, and where US troops feel safer – it's the west side they call "bad juju land". Insurgents use a strip of desert there to infiltrate Kandahar, the birthplace of the Taliban in the mid-1990s, and the pivot on which previous Afghan wars have turned. Roadside bombs hidden in the lush vineyards last year turned Arghandab into a killing field. A battalion of the 82nd Airborne Division deployed here in mid-December is hoping for better luck, but a new showdown is coming. Stanley McChrystal, the Nato commander in Afghanistan, has vowed to secure Kandahar. The Taliban want it back.



The district governor's office

One night, one of the insurgents called the governor's mobile. "He said, 'I'm going to kill you, you're working for the Americans,'" says Jabar, sitting on the carpet in his office. "I said, 'Do whatever you can do.' Then I abused him and hung up." Jabar normally cuts a rather solemn figure. At this recollection, he laughed.

Jabar is not alone in his mission. Aside from the 2-508 battalion of the 82nd Airborne, two Americans have arrived in Arghandab to help out: 27-year-old Kevin Melton and 35-year-old Christopher Harich. They're part of the Obama administration's "civilian surge", announced alongside a fresh build-up of US troops.

Working out of the whitewashed, two-storey district office, this unlikely trio aims to turn the tide of opinion in the district. They must do it before spring, when the valley will come into leaf and the Taliban fighters return from Pakistan in time for the fighting season.

"Arghandab is the gate to Kandahar city," Jabar says. "If Arghandab is lost, Kandahar is also lost. It's the most important valley in Afghanistan."



Haji Abdul Jabar and Kevin Melton of US Aid above the Arghandab Valley

Jabar, Harich and Melton have little in common but their beards. Melton, who grew up in the suburbs of Washington, is working for USAid, the US government's development agency. Hard-driving and anxious to get results, Melton juggles a raft of plans for projects from solar-powered lamps for villages, to schemes for hydroelectricity and renovating a shrine clinging to a nearby mountainside. His past experience includes work in Sudan, but the challenge in Arghandab trumps anything he has previously attempted. "It feels like there's no end to the day," he said. "It's physically, mentally, emotionally and intellectually exhausting."

Harich is a lawyer and a former marine from Louisiana who until recently worked as a policy adviser to the governor of West Virginia. He now represents the US State Department in Arghandab. "I've no doubt in my mind that we're going to have a fight this summer," he says. "When the Taliban come back in May, are they welcomed with open arms?"

Strapping on their khaki-coloured helmets and flak jackets and donning wraparound protective sunglasses whenever they leave the base, Melton and Harich bear a distinct resemblance to the US soldiers who protect them.

Jabar, meanwhile, sports neck and wrist pouches containing Koranic charms to ward off the health risks caused by his high blood pressure. (He takes advantage of the medic in the US military base adjacent to his office for regular check-ups.)

Both the Americans were lured by the challenge of participating in the US adventure in Afghanistan for a year. Sleeping in vacant rooms in the district office and equipped with a V-Sat internet link to keep in touch with superiors in Kandahar city – but no shower – they must figure out how to work with Jabar to build local government more or less from scratch. Harich aims to act as a "mentor", helping Jabar as he works with the provincial government in Kandahar to assemble an administrative team to govern the district of more than 55,000 people.