RELEASE IN FULL

From: H <hrod17@clintonemail.com>
Sent: Monday, March 8, 2010 10:28 AM
To: 'JilotyLC@state.gov'
Subject: Fw: From the FT: U.S. civilians battle to help Afghanistan
Attachments: image001.jpg; image002.jpg; image003.jpg; image004.jpg; image005.jpg; image006.jpg; image007.jpg; image001.jpg; image002.jpg; image003.jpg; image004.jpg; image005.jpg; image006.jpg; image007.jpg

Pls print.

----- Original Message -----
From: Sullivan, Jacob J <SullivanJJ@state.gov>
To: H
Sent: Mon Mar 08 10:05:39 2010
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

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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

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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 <http://www.ft.com/world/asiapacific/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 district governor's office

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 <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/30b0c4d8-091f-11df-ba88-00144feabdc0.html> , the Nato commander in Afghanistan, has vowed to secure Kandahar. The Taliban want it back.

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 <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/6f824828-183b-11df-9256-00144feab49a.html> 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 <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/ee3ee108-d60f-11de-b80f-00144feabdc0.html> ", 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 <http://www.usaid.gov/> . 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.

There are few tougher places than Arghandab, a valley where a procession of armies have been bloodied. First came the British in the 19th -century, then the Russians in the 1980s, and then last year, the 1-17 -battalion of the 5th Stryker Brigade lost 21 soldiers in five months of -fighting – one of the highest casualty rates any US unit has suffered in Afghanistan since 2001.

Conscious of the rapid approach of the fighting season, Melton is drawing up plans for projects – such as rehabilitating schools and clinics – that could quickly demonstrate to the locals the benefits of siding with the government of Hamid

Karzai, Afghanistan's president. He works closely with army officers to ensure the military's own plans to implement projects fit in with the wider, albeit still embryonic, attempts to bolster Jabar.

The trio's schemes can seem like pin-pricks set against the implacable valley below. So far, progress has been largely confined to Jabar's office. Since arriving late last year, Melton and Harris have renovated the district centre, installing air conditioners, curtains and carpets.

Jabar, who rarely ventured to his office from his home in Kandahar before these changes, now turns up almost every day, driving the 30-minute commute in his battered white Toyota Corolla saloon with three police bodyguards, -constantly wary of the risk of ambush. "Getting the building is easy," says Harich. "Getting a governor to come in and do some work is a little harder."

A trickle of men with beards and turbans arrive each morning and sit along the wall of the building waiting for Jabar to arrive, shielding their eyes from the sun as it crests the crags. They come to apply for government identity cards or attend a weekly council – or shura – to discuss projects planned by Melton. "The fact that they're even discussing this stuff is mind-boggling," he says. "They're saying, 'I can come to somebody to do something. This is what government is about: I can air my grievances to somebody other than the Taliban.'"

And yet Jabar is the first to admit that his writ does not run much -further than the building. "I don't trust the people, so I don't go out much," he says. "They may try to shoot me."

Vehicles out on night patrol

It can be tempting to measure progress in the west's war in Afghanistan in terms of damage to the Taliban – whether in capturing the movement's leaders or driving back their fighters on the battlefield. Last month, headlines were dominated by the arrest of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f4f14de4-1b09-11df-88fa-00144feab49a.html> , the Taliban's second-in-command, and by the big Nato offensive in the town of Marjah <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c8d82998-1411-11df-8847-00144feab49a.html> . But even if more Mullah Baradars are arrested, more military pushes launched, the Taliban may simply bide their time before once more exploiting alienation from the corrupt or absent government. The only way to stop that is to undertake the painstaking work of stitching together a government capable of providing more security and services than the "shadow governments" set up by the insurgents.

Western countries have been talking for years, of course, about building governance in Afghanistan, but men such as Melton and Harich represent a renewed commitment. US officials say more than 900 US civilian officers are active in Afghanistan, compared with just 300 at the start of 2009, with more than 50 destined for Kandahar province. The hope is that this team can deliver a one-two punch that long seemed elusive by exploiting military victories to nurture functioning local government. "We have to fix governance in some nominal way or this victory won't stick," says a senior US official. But the sheer scale of the task in Arghandab alone reveals the enormity of the challenge.

One afternoon, Harich sat with the governor on the office carpet for a lunch of stone-baked bread and spinach. As they talked, Jabar raised repeated requests: for bars of Dove soap, for boots for his bodyguards. The demands seemed reasonable enough but Harich did not immediately acquiesce. Part of his job is using the Americans' ability to open and close the aid taps to get Jabar to live up to their vision of an impartial, honest governor. But Jabar, like Afghan leaders at all levels of government, relies on a patronage system in which his friends expect to be rewarded and where the barrier between public and private money is porous.

Like much of Afghanistan's political class, Jabar's "legitimacy" comes from his role as a Mujahideen fighter in the 1980s, battling Soviet -invaders. (Arghandab witnessed heavy fighting: the Russians mounted a month-long siege but never took the valley.) Although governors in Afghanistan's 34 provinces have the power – in theory – to nominate district governors, US intelligence officers say Jabar owes his pre-eminence to the backing of Karimullah, the young leader of the Alakozai, an ethnic Pashtun sub-tribe dominant in the valley.

Said Amir Mohammad Agha, whose refusal to recognise Jabar's authority keeps the valley divided

Divisions between clans mean that Jabar is by no means a consensus candidate. In particular, Said Amir Mohammad Agha <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/54cf9eca-10e5-11df-9a9e-00144feab49a.html> , the single-most influential man on the west side of the river, resents him. US officers say Agha was once detained in Guantánamo Bay as a suspected Taliban commander. As long as Agha refuses to recognise Jabar's authority, the valley will remain divided.

Even on the east side, to the frustration of Melton and Harich, Jabar has yet to prove he can garner much legitimacy. Locals milling around his office mutter accusations that he skims off salaries for the few district officials who turn up to work and steers US reconstruction contracts towards his friends. "He's not a good man, he wants money and bribes," said one, reflecting comments from several visitors.

Jabar vigorously denies such allegations – indeed, they were linked to one pistol-waving incident in a meeting with the Americans. Yet such behaviour would not be unusual in Afghanistan, where bribery lubricates the patronage-based system that Karzai and past leaders have used to hold the ethnically diverse country together. The dilemma runs through the entire project in Afghanistan. Western officials want to impose a template of efficient administration, but to do this they have little choice but to work with leaders who rely on the traditional system to survive.

In Kandahar, the dilemma is acute. Afghanistan's centralised system means that Jabar is dependent on the provincial government based in the city to send officers to fill his largely empty building, but only a few have materialised. Indeed, Alakozai elders believe rivals from Karzai's Popalzai tribe are exploiting official positions in Kandahar to accumulate political and economic influence at their expense.

There is a deeper tension. US officials often speak of putting an "Afghan face" on their work. They want to make it seem as if local leaders are behind improvements to bolster their standing in the eyes of their people. Yet the talk of appearances is a tacit recognition that the enterprise is, to some extent, founded on creating an illusion of an Afghan government at work, in the hope that a real administration will rapidly follow. Can such an approach succeed? Assessing this is hard when even venturing into the valley is a potentially life-threatening undertaking.

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The risk of attack in Arghandab is so high that during a recent week in January, Melton and Harich barely ventured from the base – apart from a brief trip in an armoured convoy to catch up with superiors in Kandahar city. Soldiers of the 82nd Airborne tend to get closer to the locals. Even a short trip out into the east side of the valley shows how close at hand the Taliban are, and how hard it will be to persuade people that they are safe enough to side with Jabar.

The soldiers leave the base in high-wheeled armoured vehicles called Cougar M-Raps – designed to resist roadside bombs. Lieutenant Ryan Christmas, a reassuringly experienced veteran of the 82nd, gives a briefing on where the convoy should go if it gets hit by an IED. "Call out what you see, gunners stay vigilant in what you're doing," he yells at his men, -clustered around him before departure. "If it looks wrong and smells wrong, it -probably is wrong."

From the bullet-proof window, a procession of mud homes that seem to grow organically from the valley floor rolled past. A few weeks before, a man had pulled out a pistol and shot and wounded two Afghan policemen near the road. These days, insurgents are targeting foot patrols to make it more dangerous to try to build up a rapport with locals.

Sgt Donny Kuehner takes tea with Haji Jhapour

At a US outpost at a village called Sakari Bagh, Sergeant Donny -Kuehner, a 23-year-old from southern California, led a patrol through a bazaar of ramshackle stalls selling blotchy bunches of bananas dangling from strings and stacked cans of Power Stag – "World's Finest Quality Motor Oil". Removing his helmet, Kuehner entered a petrol station owned by Haji Jhapour – the unofficial king of the bazaar – whose assistant served green tea. An Afghan policeman wearing mascara and a yellow bandana round his neck joined the circle as the two men talked, via an interpreter.

"How do people in the bazaar feel about us being here?" Kuehner asked.

"The people in the bazaar are good people, they're busy doing business," Jhapour replied.

"You heard anything lately about any kind of Taliban anywhere, or anything?" Kuehner asked.

"I'm so busy with my business, I don't have time to follow the Taliban – this is the job of the police," Jhapour said, gesturing to the man with the mascara. "When people come here and buy petrol I sometimes hear news. If I hear anything, I'll let you know."

As he walked back into the base, Kuehner confessed it was hard to know where local loyalties lay. Some of the labourers busy filling barriers with earth to build up the outpost's defences had been beaten by Taliban fighters. "The locals are the key to all this," Kuehner said. "Getting them on our side – if we could do that – it would be leaps and bounds from where we are now."

Such ambiguous encounters are the stuff of the daily grind of counter-insurgency, where building relationships is critical. After gradually -adopting such an approach to fight the insurgency in Iraq, the US military is honing its skills in Afghanistan. But it is clear that soldiers can only do so much: unless a viable government emerges, their presence will have scant lasting impact. As the US faces the risk of increasingly messy conflicts in parts of Asia, Africa and the Middle East, building governance just after the fighting will be increasingly decisive.

Critics of the approach believe the US is being sucked into an open-ended "nation-building" exercise in Afghanistan. Barack Obama has been careful to downplay such suggestions <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/5f6ce026-df6d-11de-98ca-00144feab49a.html> , though in Arghandab, the -distinction is blurry.

Locals at work on a US combat outpost

On the mountainside near the governor's office, women climb winding steps to a shrine set high above the valley. They whisper wishes into stones, wrap them in shimmering cloth and hang them from a pole planted in the tomb of the saint.

The site feels forlorn. Fountains cascading down the rocks have run dry. A restaurant with a panoramic view, film-set staircases and ornamental trees lies abandoned. Turquoise tiles on the mausoleum dome are cracked.

Clad in their body armour, Melton and Harich take a tour with the -governor one afternoon. Melton wants to see the restaurant reopen – if a new owner can be found. There is talk of installing a pump to make the fountains flow. In the valley, a pair of US helicopters pirouette, scanning for insurgents. As the trio ambles about, an explosion sounds far off on the valley floor. It sends up a puff of grey smoke. Talk of renovation jars with the reality that the fighting season will soon resume – and the window to get anything done is closing fast.

There is one surprise. One morning, Agha, the retired Taliban commander from the west side, decided to pay a visit. An enigmatic figure, he clutched prayer beads and produced a certificate from US forces saying he had been imprisoned for four months in 2004 but no longer posed a threat. He seemed to want Jabar and his crowd to know this. Should he decide to work with them, US officers hope for an easier year.

Perhaps the influx of troops and resources committed by Washington may encourage men like Agha to reconsider their loyalties. But after 30 years of war, building institutions will be harder. Both the US civilians and military in Arghandab were doing their best to help Jabar establish a -government. But all participants seemed conscious that even their best efforts might not be enough. When Melton and Harich leave, there are no guarantees that Jabar will prosper.

In his waistcoat pocket, the governor keeps a tin of green chewing tobacco, a medallion for "excellence" given to him by the soldiers of the ill-fated 1-17, and a hand-written letter from Afghanistan's intelligence service warning of a Taliban death threat. "Every day they are killing someone," he said. Then he climbed once more into his Toyota to brave the road back to -Kandahar once more, taking his empty tea flask and his gun.

Matthew Green covers Afghanistan and Pakistan for the FT. His last story for the magazine was about the governor of Lagos State. Read it at ft.com/lagos <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/3d3209aa-8225-11de-9c5e-00144feabdc0.html>