

Building peace is harder than fighting in Afghan town

Two shots ring out in the darkness as the Danish army jeeps crawl through an unlit, heavily rutted alley - a perfect site for an enemy ambush or a strike by suicide bombers known to be at large in the town.

The patrol commander quickly establishes the source: One of his men fired warning shots at a minivan as it approached without headlights and failed to heed torch signals to stop. One bullet blew out a front tyre while fragments of the other ricocheted into the Afghan driver's foot.

'I thought it was children playing,' the 20-year-old man says before he is driven to the nearby military base for surgery, his pain dulled by a shot of the medic's morphine.

Foreign troops familiar with Gereshk, a market town of stalls and mud houses with some 40,000 inhabitants in Afghanistan's southern Helmand province, say things were simpler a year or more ago when it was a straight shooting match with Taliban insurgents for control of the area.

Rampant fire fights now appear to be a thing of the past, but cultivation of normal life in a tense environment renders the peace highly susceptible to such accidents.

And amid the cautious shift from so-called kinetic operations - fighting to the layman - to non-kinetic work, or the reconstruction and development, the international forces are often even more vulnerable to attack by enemies concealed among the daily bustle of traders.

In mid-March a suicide bomber walked up to soldiers assessing the needs of the local bazaar and blew himself up, killing two members of a Danish civilian and military cooperation (CIMIC) team, a Czech army officer and two locals.

According to witnesses, the bomber smiled in the face of an escort soldier as he walked into the middle of the group and flipped the switch.

'It was hard for us to cope with losing one of our three teams,' said Major Peter, who leads the effort to build up the infrastructure of the dilapidated town and surrounding region.

Like many in the contingent, he does not use his surname to protect his identity. members of the unit are high on the insurgents' list of targets and there are concerns that they could be hounded back in Denmark after their tour ends in August.

For now, the threat is constant. More suicide bombers were reportedly sent to Gereshk in May and in early June a mine strike hit a CIMIC jeep, injuring one Dane and a Briton.

Meanwhile, the hidden enemy still exerts a strong psychological influence on the area. Night drops of leaflets warn people not to cooperate with the foreigners, and this is reflected in the frequent difficulties in recruiting local labour for building projects.

They are still intimidated by the Taliban, says the officer, citing a garbage collection project initiated by the town mayor.

Despite high unemployment, it has only been possible to recruit 11 workers for the 30-man squad needed to run two garbage trucks donated by his team. Or the reconstruction message simply fails to reach people or register with those whose lives were coloured by years of destruction wrought by a successive armies and factions.

'I feel like a company with a really good product but no one knows I've got it,' he says. 'The only thing that will change that is time, we just have to make sure we don't lose the (support of the) locals. We have all this money for development but money without time is worthless.'

Recent steps towards normality included the creation of a radio station that offers a mix of Afghan music, announcements and interviews, and the establishment of the towns first 911-type emergency telephone number.

The concept still has to gel with the locals: the first caller rang to complain there was no electricity in his house and the second requested a song on the radio. But these are battles of a happier kind compared to those that raged here in the past.

'This war is not going to be won by killing people,' said Lt. Col. Peter Boysen, the acting commander of more than 600 Danish soldiers deployed in Afghanistan as part of the 40-country International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

'Creating a better alternative to what the Taliban can offer, that's what this is about. Ultimately, success will rest on being able to hand over responsibility for all aspects of daily life to the Afghans themselves,' Boysen added.

The task of instilling a basic level of competence and cohesion among the administration, army, police and other institutions frays the nerves of successive teams of foreign trainers.

But this, too, is a matter of small steps and patience, said Captain Brian O'Neill of the Royal Regiment of Scotland, a liaison officer working with the local authorities.

'They've come on in leaps and bounds,' he said after a meeting of assorted Afghan officials that addressed a range of governance and security issues. 'One month ago they wouldn't even have sat with each other like this.'

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