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The Guardian

No friendly waves only hatred for British troops in Afghan town

By Jon Boone

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In Sangin all you can feel is the intense hatred of people who hate everything you stand for, says photographer David Gill.

As with so many of the Helmand towns where the British are present the bazaar in Sangin is officially "thriving".

Indeed, recent visitors have to admit that there are signs of commerce in the long thin strip of shops. But the rest, says David Gill, a photographer who visited Sangin three times last year, is like "a ghost town in Death Valley where you drive through and all you see is a sign flapping in the wind".

In some of the more benign areas of Helmand children may offer the occasional wave to passing soldiers, but in Sangin all you can feel is the "intense hatred of a people who hate everything you stand for", Gill says. Development work has been glacial. The new "traditional courthouse" is little more than a room with six plastic chairs.

When the British arrived in June 2006 they had to fight while filling sandbags and constructing their base at FOB (Forward Operation Base) Jackson. Sometimes the base came close to being overrun.

The figures for British deaths in Sangin and its immediate surroundings make stark reading: of the 281 servicemen and women who have died in Afghanistan, 88 lost their lives there.

For some soldiers the notoriety of the posting brings out grim humour. They wear T-shirts with the motif "Wishtan you were here?", in reference to the notorious FOB Wishtan, with a mixture of pride and irony.

It took months to clear all the alleyways around Wishtan that had been intensively seeded with homemade bombs. No wonder Jerry Thomas, the brigadier in charge of British forces in Helmand when they first moved into Sangin, was said to be deeply sceptical about the wisdom of the move.

Today fighting is still intense, and in army spokesman Gordon Messenger's words, Sangin is "the most challenging area in which British troops operate".

Now the district is officially the country's most lethal place for foreign forces, responsible for more than 10% of daily casualties of the entire Nato mission, as a result of its particularly poisonous mix of drugs and tribal warfare. With lots of water and fertile land, Sangin is perfect for growing the poppies currently being harvested for their opium sap.

Sangin is also well suited as a trafficking hub because of its proximity to the national ring road, putting cities such as Herat and Kandahar in easy reach.

The drugs industry has every reason to fight against attempts to assert government control, making natural allies of the insurgents in the district.

The Afghan government is in no position to assert itself against such powerful narco-traffickers who hopelessly compromise what little government capacity does exist. According to a Kabul-based diplomat last year the district had only 50 Afghan policemen and about 350 soldiers.

The abusive and corrupt police force, whose members think nothing of beating and stealing from local people, has been a constant problem, with the British seen as the enforcement mechanism for deeply corrupt Afghan authorities.

Drugs and weak government are further complicated by a complex tribal situation. The fighting between armed factions during Afghanistan's civil war in the 1990s helped to fragment and weaken traditional tribal authority.

"The picture that emerges is one where a minority tribe controls the government and the majority, which is not in government, control the heroin. Everyone else gets angry and joins the Taliban," says one Kabul diplomat with knowledge of Helmand.

The people of Sangin blame inter-tribal fighting and the drug trade for the dire security situation, but also hold the foreign soldiers responsible for the chaos.

According to two farmers currently staying in Lashkar Gah who were contacted by the Guardian but did not want to be named, the behaviour of the British is by the far the biggest problem.

One said: "The Taliban do not even have a bakery that they can give bread to the people, but still most people support the Taliban – that's because people are sick of night raids and being treated badly by the foreigners."