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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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If Afghanistan Seems Violent Now, Just You Wait

By Andrew Bast

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Pay no attention to the war behind the curtain.

In the months leading up to June, as tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers landed in Afghanistan, all the talk was about Kandahar. It's a big city (there are about a million people in and around it), and the plan was to win it back from the brutish, nasty, and resurgent Taliban. As we've said before, the stakes are as high as ever for President Obama, who's made the campaign for Afghanistan all his. As we wrote last week, the battle for Kandahar would be the turning point of the war.

Except that now, umm, there is no war in Kandahar. Commanders and officials from the U.S., Nato, and the Afghan military are playing down any notion that they were taking on the Taliban in the south of the country with guns a blazing. "It's not going to be an aggressive military campaign," an American official told The New York Times. "They've looked at it and realized it wouldn't work." Others say that there was never an "offensive" in the works. (But there was certainly an offensive in the neighboring hamlet of Marja.) Instead, winning back the Opium-filled south now depends on a "civilian surge" of aid, agricultural, and diplomatic experts. The tens of thousands of troops who are armed to the gill will, as the reporting goes, now play second fiddle, supporting them.

One problem: According to the Times, there are about 110 of these civilians working on Kandahar, and fifty more are due soon. That may be more than a fifteen-fold increase from the 8 that were there last year, but 150 smart Americans to administer an area of a million people that is ostensibly under siege?

Because the bottom line is that violence is surging. This week, ground fire downed a NATO helicopter in Helmand Province (that's where Kandahar is), killing five. A bombing at a wedding in Kandahar killed 40 locals. And of course as Afghan President Hamid Karzai's Peace Summit in the capital of Kabul was rocked by Taliban attacks. So far this year, according to the Pentagon, 143 Americans troops have been killed—almost 1,500 have been wounded. And the trend lines, yes, are heading up.

Counterinsurgency, the strategy the Americans are employing to “win over the population” isn't based solely on conquering your enemy. It's about gaining trust and support. But the fact is that before you build, you have to clear and hold. And the Taliban is surely fighting like mad to clear its side. What's left to hold (and how many non-soldier hands the Americans have got to do it) makes this summer look like it's not only going to be bloody, but confusing.