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The Wedding Day Massacre: An Ominous Afghan Tragedy

By Julius Cavendish

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It was past midnight when the insurgents crossed into Afghanistan's Dur Baba district on the border with Pakistan and began their descent. In the valley below, relatives of the district governor, Hamisha Gul, a tall, handsome man in his late 40s, had gathered at his compound to celebrate the impending marriage of his cousin Nawshir. The wedding would take place the next day and the plans were festive. Men would dance the traditional Pashtun attan to the beating of the tabla and the plucking of the rabab. At Gul's pre-wedding party, dozens of men were taking advantage of the seasonal warmth to sleep out under the trees. That's when the masked gunmen opened fire.



In total the Taliban-linked militants killed nine, all men, including Nawshir and his father Rozi Khan. Five more were wounded, and the attackers torched a nearby house and car for good measure, as well as briefly abducting one of the guests. Thursday saw villagers bury the man whose wedding they had come to celebrate. Hundreds gathered to pay their respects before shouldering the litters on which the bodies lay, draped in white shrouds, carrying them to fresh graves.

The raid by militants belonging to Lashkar-e-Islam, one of several groups that make up the Pakistani Taliban, was a brutal example of how sharply security is deteriorating in Nangarhar, a key Afghan province that was once an exemplar because of its relative peace. It was a troubling reminder of how Afghanistan was faring even as U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates insisted Thursday there would "be no rush to the exits" ahead of a decision by President Obama on how quickly to start bringing home the 100,000 American troops.

According to Raees Khan, a member of the groom's family, the attack took place "not because [the militants] had problems with the groom but because they accused the district chief of being with the government and cooperating with NATO forces." Tribal elders echoed the sentiment and Gul himself said that the assailants accused the man they briefly kidnapped of being an "American spy" before letting him go.

The Taliban and their allies are waging a nationwide campaign targeting government officials and community leaders, and to an extent that seems to be what happened in Dur Baba. Gul is credited with helping to hold the district for the government. An influential figure in the Shinwari tribe, which has a history of fierce independence (It was described by Rudyard Kipling as being impossible to tame), Gul nonetheless has proved adept at "mobilizing support for the government," according to officials in the area.

But the attack may have had more complex motives, despite relatives' insistence that the raid was not personal. An Afghan official speaking on condition of anonymity said that a month ago Lashkar-e-Islam fighters had tried to cross from their bases in Pakistan's Khyber Agency into Afghanistan to launch attacks against the Kabul government and NATO targets. "They wanted to attack the district HQ," the official explained. "But the villagers stopped them."

The village where Gul's compound is located is a 15-minute walk from Pakistan and elders there knew the insurgents would want to return by the same path. According to the Afghan official, "Tribal leaders told them: 'If you start firing here we'll kill you when return. Better that you don't attack or you will bring NATO bombardment on us all.'" Supposedly chastened, the cross-border insurgents did not attack the district headquarters. But, says the official, they decided that the village would pay for blocking their progress. "This latest attack was revenge."

It's just once incident of many that are turning Nangarhar, once regarded as one of Afghanistan's post-2001 success stories, into one of the country's most dangerous provinces. In the first quarter of 2011, insurgent attacks in the province were up 68% against the year before, according to ANSO, a Kabul-based NGO providing security advice. It now rates Nangarhar as "highly

insecure". Among the more notable attacks were a suicide bombing that killed 13 people last month, and a February attack on a bank in the provincial capital, Jalalabad, that left 38 people dead and drew gasps for sheer brazenness.

The reasons for the uptick in violence are hard to untangle. But it began around a year ago, says Fabrizio Foschini, a member of the Afghanistan Analysts Network, a Kabul-based think-tank, who has been following events in eastern Afghanistan. He says that in early 2010 a number of different insurgent groups, including Lashkar-e-Islam and the better-known Haqqani Network, began focusing more intently on the province. Militants from nearby Kunar province, for years an insurgent hotbed, have also been attacking targets in Nangarhar, perhaps in an attempt to blood themselves before moving onto more complex assaults. "You could say there was an increased interest in putting pressure on that strategic province at the higher level, the leadership level. [It could also be] a pressure tool by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence agency toward the Afghan government," Foschini says.

Another important aspect is the waning political fortunes of long-time provincial governor, Gul Agha Sherzai — a bear of a man who holds court and dispenses patronage like one of Afghanistan's kings of old. Foschini reckons his means of keeping the insurgency under control, whether by bribery or other methods, are losing their effectiveness. Political rivals are also ganging up. Following the spectacular Kabul Bank attack, parliamentarians, provincial council members and influential elders demanded his resignation and launched a wave of protests that quickly took on a life of their own. "Local stakeholders [have] stopped exerting their influence to keep the situation cool," Foschini says, "to show their dissatisfaction toward Governor Sherzai." In May, Sherzai confided to a Western diplomat that President Hamid Karzai had asked him to consider taking a new job.

One of those frequently rumored to be in line to replace him is Juma Khan Hamdard, the controversial governor of nearby Paktia province, a place rife with allegations of corruption. "I'm not entirely sure what this would entail, but probably much greater insecurity," one Western diplomat says. However many troops Obama decides to withdraw, there are no signs they will come from Nangarhar, where the insurgency is alive and kicking.