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The National

War shatters the peace of northern Afghanistan

Chris Sands

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BAGHLAN, AFGHANISTAN // Mohammed Faisal Samay looked out the window and across the wide, mud-coloured river to the nearby hills that mark the edge of the city.

“Those are the border between the government and the Taliban,” he said. “Any moment the Taliban can reach us from there.”

Pul-e-Khumri, the capital of Baghlan province, lies on the main highway linking Kabul to northern Afghanistan and central Asia. For years this was a peaceful area, far from the violence and uncertainty of the south and east.

Then, slowly but surely, the rebellion started. At first the groups of armed men were small in number, spreading the word in remote mountain villages, amid the rice paddies and wheat fields of the countryside.

Gradually, they gained strength and grew in size. Civilians were threatened, taxes were forced upon farmers and, in some cases, girls aged 12 or over were barred from attending school. People claimed the insurgents had Arabs, Chechens and Pakistanis in their ranks. Others said they were all local Pashtuns.

Now Baghlan is at the heart of a struggle for control of northern Afghanistan. Who wins the battle will not only decide the destiny of the residents here, it could ultimately shape the future of much of the region.

“Each morning when we come to the office, we are not sure we will return home safely,” said Mr Samay, a provincial councillor.

His fears are justified. In April, a few metres from where he was speaking, one of his fellow councillors was sitting in a car when the vehicle’s door was pulled open and she was shot, mafia-style, at point-blank range.

It was broad daylight at the time and she was left seriously wounded.

That such an incident could occur in the city would have been unthinkable not so long ago, but it is the inevitable spillover of the bloodshed that has become common in surrounding areas.

Perhaps the first obvious sign that a new front in the war was developing arrived last August, when insurgents launched a high-profile attack in Baghlan-e-Jadid district on the day of the presidential election, killing several police.

Security has deteriorated noticeably since then and everything from roadside bombings to ambushes and even executions are now a fact of life in the province.

“The situation is 90 or 95 per cent bad,” said Nooria Hamidi, another councillor.

She was initially reluctant to be interviewed, fearing that the request to meet a foreign journalist was in fact an attempt by the Taliban to lure her into a trap.

“If I talk the truth, it will not be sweet. Now I am very scared. I am even scared of my own bodyguards,” she said.

Ms Hamidi is not allowed to walk through the city without government-supplied protection. She has been urged by the intelligence service to flee to Kabul for her own safety until the trouble passes.

The councillors have different ideas as to why the war has come to Baghlan. They mention high unemployment, discrimination between tribes, a weak state and poorly trained local security forces as possible causes.

Then there is the province’s mountainous landscape and position as a crucial transport hub, making it an ideal target for rebel attacks, as well as a potential staging ground for future guerrilla missions across the north.

Haji Arbab Faramooz is a pro-government elder from Baghlan-e-Markazi, in Baghlan-e-Jadid. He has been threatened “more than 20 times” and believes the only way to end the

fighting is to negotiate with the Taliban. Despite supporting the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan, he warned that their tactics are alienating residents.

“These people are like animals. Before knocking or sending in Afghan soldiers, if the door to a house is open, they will enter. If it is not, they will kick it, split it into a thousand pieces and then go in. For Pashtuns, being killed is better than that,” he said.

Mr Faramooz also had a rumour he wanted to share. The US and its allies, he heard, had used helicopters to secretly ferry in militants, destabilise the area and help to justify their presence here. Far fetched it might be, but the same story is constantly told by the people of Baghlan, who have learnt from history to distrust outsiders.

International forces have a reconstruction team here and conduct combat operations in the province. They claim to have landed two significant blows against the local insurgency recently, first killing the Taliban’s shadow governor and then arresting his successor. Whether these developments will have any genuine impact is, however, questionable.

From around 6pm every evening until early in the morning the phone networks in Baghlan are down, the rebels blocking the signals so they can move around freely without fear of their whereabouts being reported. The lack of coverage even extends to Pul-e-Khumri.

It is a hint of the power that Taliban rebels now appear to hold over the population. An employee at a school in Baghlan-e-Jadid described how the rebels executed one man five or six months ago whom they accused of spying.

Two others are due to be put to death pending a verdict from the insurgents’ justice commission.

The school worker, who wished to remain anonymous, looked around nervously while describing all of this. With every faint noise he fidgeted.

“It will be very dangerous if they know I have had a meeting with a foreign journalist,” he explained. “Immediately they will hang me.”