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## East Afghanistan Sees Taliban as ‘Morally Superior’ to Karzai

By Spencer Ackerman

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The looming security operations — er, “[rising tide](#)” — in southern Afghanistan are getting all the attention. But the American-led coalition may be in serious trouble in eastern Afghanistan as well. According to a just-departed U.S. commander in charge of a big chunk of the area, locals in four critical provinces believe that the Taliban have greater religious legitimacy and a stronger commitment to justice than Hamid Karzai’s government. Coalition forces who aid that government are seen as “naive at best,” and “co-conspirators’ at worst.”

Last month, Army Colonel Randy George completed a year-long tour leading the nearly 5800 soldiers of Task Force Mountain Warrior in some of Afghanistan’s most violent and vexing areas: Nangarhar, Nuristan, Kunar, and Laghman provinces, a mountainous part of the country home to about 3.7 million people, 33 tribes and sub-tribes, and over 300 kilometers’ worth of porous border with tribal Pakistan. After a yearlong effort to learn how the locals perceived the obstacles to their future, George prepared some briefing slides attempting to distill popular local sentiments. (He did not make any broader judgment about any other areas of Afghanistan.) Danger Room was recently able to review some of those slides and take notes on their contents, although we weren’t permitted to take them or reproduce them.

George titled of those slides “How Locals Ranked The Enemies To Progress.” Through the locals’ eyes, the slide reported four big challenges. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban rank dead last. A “Corrupt and Ineffective Government” is number one.

Now recall that it’s General David Petraeus’ [first week of work in command](#) of the Afghanistan war. He’s got no shortage of challenges: convincing the Afghan people that the NATO coalition acts in its best interest; rolling back insurgent gains; working with an Afghan government of dubious competence and integrity; and doing it all before 30,000 surge troops (allegedly) start coming home in July 2011. Perhaps nowhere in Afghanistan do all these challenges combine and metastasize as ominously as in the area George recently departed.

There’s disaffection for the central government in the area known as “N2KL” (for Nangarhar, Nuristan, Kunar, and Laghman provinces). There’s outrage over government officials who charge bribes for the provision of government services. And there’s resentment over “illegitimate” or “non-existent” rule of law. The government is seen as “Un-Islamic and People Don’t Want to Connect,” George’s slide notes.

The second and third problems roiling are the dual challenges of “Criminal Networks and Graft” and the government’s “Lack of Inclusion of Respected Leaders at the Local Level.” The area has natural resources — like timber with high-grade cedar — that could serve as economic drivers. But as the *Wall Street Journal* has documented, in 2006 the Karzai government instituted a [ban on logging](#) as a questionable save-the-forests maneuver. Unsurprisingly, logging didn’t stop. It just went underground and became illicit, benefiting the insurgency and reinforcing what George’s slide called a “take what you can get when you can get it” mentality that the locals resent. (Petraeus [alluded](#) to the problematic nature of the government’s attitude to logging in a congressional hearing in mid-June, before President Obama tapped him to run the Afghanistan war.)

If the government included or listened to local potentates respected by the community, maybe it wouldn’t press forward with alienating measures like the logging ban. But instead, the slide reads, it “injects unfair and unacceptable personalities into local politics,” and its district sub-governors and the central government “do not reach out to connect” to the population.

As a result, those big mistakes by the Afghan government lead the locals of N2KL to rank the “Taliban/al-Qaeda/Militant-Insurgent ‘Syndicate’” fourth out of four on George’s list of how they perceive their problems. Locals consider the insurgents “morally superior” to the Karzai government. The insurgents provide the population something the government doesn’t, or at least doesn’t provide sufficiently: “culturally appropriate access to justice, resources and Islamic identity,” in George’s assessment.

Nor is the U.S. or its allies off the hook for the government’s errors. As befitting allies of a resented and aloof government, another slide of George’s reports that “Coalition Forces Seen As Naive at Best and ‘Co-Conspirators’ At Worst.”

None of that led George to throw up his hands and consider his mission hopeless. It led him to do what he could to get Afghan government officials to the area and address the locals' legitimate grievances. He responded to the powerful Shinwari tribe's offer of an alliance of convenience against the Taliban — until the governor of Nangarhar province, Gul Agha Shirzai, [nixed the experiment](#) and the U.S. embassy in Kabul balked at the military playing tribal politics. He expanded radio broadcasting in the area to get the coalition's message out. He used cash at his disposal to help local government officials execute their budgets in an attempt at economic stimulus. And he got local officials to hold public trials for official corruption and violent crimes.

Members of George's Task Force said George would tell the locals, "I know there are officials are corrupt and predatory officials, and we need your help to fix the problem."

Whether the problem gets fixed, though, remains to be seen. Since General Stanley McChrystal arrived in Afghanistan in June 2009, U.S. military efforts have shifted toward the Taliban's southern heartland and away from the eastern border areas. George was tasked with closing bases in remote and hard-to-defend locations away from populous parts of his battlespace, including, in April, [withdrawing](#) from the violent Korengal Valley in Kunar.

It may have been the right move: senior officers assessed that the U.S. presence did more to inflame the locals than contribute to the fight against the insurgency. And George does not dispute the wisdom of the redeployment. But with Petraeus having about a year to reverse the Taliban's momentum before broader withdrawals begin, it's an open question whether the remaining U.S. forces in eastern Afghanistan will be able to compel a distrusted national government to meaningfully connect with a deeply distrustful population in the area George labored to secure.