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The Real News Network

The gangs of Kandahar—the city's real power?

Author Stephen Grey

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Author Stephen Grey writes about how "warlords" control the Afghan city of Kandahar, a population centre deemed by Nato to be its number one target in its battle with the Taliban. His on-the-ground investigation will feature on Channel 4 News tonight.

Declared by President Obama as this year's top priority in the ongoing war in Afghanistan, Kandahar is the country's second city and the heartland of the Taliban rebel movement.

It is the centre of Nato operations this summer. I spent much of the last two months in and around the city, embedded first with Nato troops and then stepping "outside the wire" to operate independently, trying to read the temperature of a place that is frequently described in news reports as the Taliban's greatest "stronghold" in the country.

A switch in strategy ordered last year by General Stanley McChrystal, the Nato and US commander in Afghanistan, has turned attention from heavy fighting in rural areas like northern Helmand where most British troops are based, to the main centres of population, which McChrystal now declares to be "the centre of gravity" of the military campaign.

The theory goes that if the bulk of the population are made to feel secure, they will resist the temptation to support the Taliban.

Real development can then take place, and the people may start to support the Afghan government, and the insurgency will wither away. But how do things seem on the ground?

The first thing to realise is that any kind of Nato offensive has as much potential to make things worse as it does to make things better.

The city of Kandahar is an un-easy, fear-ridden, and violent place. Government is weak and corruption is rife. But Taliban stronghold it is not. Yet.

This is not Helmand where a simple walk out of a base in Sangin valley, for instance, is a prelude to a certain gun battle. For now, there is no part of the city where the Afghan government's army and police cannot venture.

The Taliban's agents may intimidate, and they may send their fighters in to mount suicide bomb blasts against government buildings. But this is like Saigon was in the Vietnam War, or perhaps Palermo at its worse.

The checkpoints are still nominally held by the government. By declaring Kandahar to be target Number One, Nato also seems to be goading the Taliban to come and declare war in a city that although in dire straits has until now been largely un-scathed by major fighting.

The population may not thank McChrystal for his trouble. For now, though, who then rules this city? The surprising thing I found is that the real power in the city seems to lie not with the Taliban but, say locals, with a series of different armed groups.

Like some mafia capital, the real decisions here, say locals, are made by powerful "warlords", commanders of armed bands, and dominant tribes who are said by all to have grown rich from the swelling contracts to work with Nato troops, and particular United States forces.

On a daily basis, there are reports of political assassinations, of raids on people's homes, of kidnapping, and of robbery on the roads. But, as I saw one tribal elder bravely tell President Hamid Karzai, when the Afghan president visited, here "it's just too easy to blame the Taliban for everything."

The word that Kandaharis use all the time is "militia" – a term for irregular forces that sums up gunmen who may appear here in the uniforms of private security companies, as members of the police or other government force, or out of uniform as thugs-for-hire to extort or intimidate.

Most disturbing was the frequent suggestion that the reason for the power exerted by these groups was their close relationship with both the US military and other parts of the coalition, including intelligence agencies.

Although the US and coalition officially condemn any form of "militias", insisting they work only with groups that are approved and licensed by the Afghan government, in reality many of the gunmen who "belong" to the powerful warlord clans of the city have been enlisted for help by Nato.

Armed militias may be found as guards at coalition gates or as guards that protect Nato supply convoys, in the guise of interpreters and other staff at coalition bases, and as special units attached to coalition special forces and intelligence teams.

Two powerful warlords, for instance, have seized most of the "government" property in the city used by Nato. One controls construction projects. Another has a powerful influence on who gets employed at the huge Kandahar airbase.

According to those I interviewed, most of the power held by the militia leaders stems not from their links to the Afghan government but from the hundreds of millions of pounds of contracts awarded by the military and Western civilian agencies which these men conspire to monopolise.

Sometimes I wonder if it might be more useful to send a brigade of expert auditors to Kandahar to vet the contracts, than to send a division of soldiers. The film I ended up making – to be broadcast tomorrow – explores those links between the Nato coalition and what might be called the "Gangs of Kandahar".

We will post more details up tomorrow, but I think it's quite a fresh take on the instability and injustice that lies behind this war in Afghanistan.

Before I explored this subject, I was told that few would dare to appear on camera to discuss such subjects.

At least one local journalist has been killed for raising these issues. But there were many we did find who care enough and were courageous enough to speak out.

Stephen Grey's investigation on Kandahar was filmed and produced by Stephen and Afghan journalist N.R., (who cannot be named in full) with additional research by Oliver Laughland.