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Taliban Challenge U.S. in Eastern Afghanistan

By RAY RIVERA

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The villagers gathered on mounds of dirt to watch as the American armored vehicles rolled in. The streets were narrow and banked by high mud walls; the bulky vehicles could barely squeeze through. The villagers had not seen a coalition patrol here in at least two years, they told the American commander as he stepped out to greet them.

“And how long has it been since you’ve seen the governor?” the commander, Capt. Aaron T. Schwengler, asked the villagers as they crowded around him.

“Ten years,” one man said through an interpreter.

But the villagers do see the **Taliban**, and on a nightly basis. Insurgent leaders here and in many of the other small farming villages that dot much of the Andar District in Ghazni, one of Afghanistan’s more troubled provinces, have filled the void left by the government. They settle land and water disputes and dictate school curriculums. They issue curfews and order local residents, by way of “night letters,” not to talk to foreign forces.

It is in this environment that coalition forces must try to persuade villagers to trust a government they seldom see, and to help coalition forces root out the Taliban at great personal risk.

While American-led NATO forces have claimed gains in the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, this strategically vital part of Afghanistan's east, at the crossroads of Highway 1 from Kabul to Kandahar and along roads out to the provinces of Paktia and Paktika, has proved stubborn. Despite beefed-up coalition patrols in recent months, the insurgents are still sheltering in this remote wheat-farming area.

Though NATO officials dispute the notion, local residents say the coalition forces lost momentum here two years ago when the Americans quit patrolling and turned the region over to the Polish military, which the Afghans say sharply curtailed patrols.

Without question, security has eroded. Insurgent attacks in Andar have surged 113 percent since 2008, and in neighboring Deh Yak 106 percent, according to military figures. Battalion patrols engage in regular firefights with the Taliban, often up close. And the insurgents are employing more sophisticated improvised explosive devices, imported from the lawless tribal areas of Pakistan, using remote control devices and safe-arming switches to set off explosions.

Fighters from the Haqqani network, based out of North Waziristan, Pakistan, have increasingly targeted the southwest part of the province. Military officials say traditional Taliban fighters under the leadership of the Quetta shura have increasingly hit other areas in the province.

In October, nine American soldiers were ambushed as they sat down to midday tea with a villager. Insurgents pounded the house with rocket-propelled grenades and machine-gun fire, wounding three soldiers and knocking out their radio. Sgt. First Class Paul Meacham popped a can of red smoke to signal for help from the nearby forward operating base. The fight went on for 15 minutes until armored vehicles rolled in and drove the insurgents away.

The battalion had been in a lucky bubble since arriving in Ghazni. Though more than 40 members had been wounded, none had been killed. Their good fortune ran out on Dec. 15, just two months short of going home, when insurgents fatally shot a soldier while he was on an operation intended to flush the Taliban out of the local villages.

"There's definitely a fight here," said Capt. Robert Kellum, the battalion's intelligence officer. "It's a definite safe haven for the Taliban."

The September parliamentary elections further illustrated the Taliban's grip on eastern Ghazni, about 90 miles south of Kabul. In Andar, a district of about 100,000 people, only three people voted. Some Ghazni leaders have blamed Taliban intimidation and the poor state of security for the turnout. But it also reflected the disaffection many Pashtuns, the ethnic majority, here feel toward the Kabul government.

Either way, the result was a victory for the Taliban.

“It certainly gave some credibility that it’s a strong insurgency,” said Lt. Col. David G. Fivecoat, commander of the Third Battalion, 187th Infantry, the American Army unit that took charge of the area from Polish forces in September. “It gave them street cred.”

One place the government’s minimal footprint can be seen is in the schools. The government pays teachers’ salaries and buys books. But even here, the Taliban assert their influence. At a school of about 1,300 boys and 30 teachers in the nearby village of Chawni, the Taliban recently posted a letter on the wall detailing the curriculum that was to be taught.

“So here they get money from the government, books from the government, and they think it’s perfectly legitimate to teach what that Taliban tells them,” said Captain Schwengler, who commands the Third Battalion’s Company B.

Turning that influence around has been tough going for the American forces. They have had some success getting government officials to visit the rural stretches. Checkpoints improved security on some roads. But reconciliation efforts with local Taliban have been largely futile.

So, too, has the push to recruit local police officers, under a fledgling program to provide temporary security until Afghan national security forces can be built up enough to take over. About 2,100 local police officers have been recruited in 13 locations across the country since the program began in July, according to NATO officials, but none here.

The long-term nature of the challenge was clear to Captain Schwengler during his company’s recent visit to Jumah Kala, a village of about 1,000 people. While talking with a crowd of schoolchildren, he asked them what they wanted to be when they grew up. Hands shot up. Schoolteacher, some boys shouted gleefully. Doctor, others said.

“Who wants to be a policeman?” the captain asked. Hands dropped. “What about the army?” the captain said, pointing to a nearby Afghan National Army soldier who patrolling with the Americans that day. Silence.

For now, the American unit’s main focus here has been on restoring security: pushing the Taliban out so that governing and development can proceed. “We can’t build something if we’re getting shot at,” the captain said.

The Afghan district’s governor, Sher Khan, said he had evidence that security was getting better “day by day” with the Americans here, though the Taliban are still able to intimidate and kill.

And there is a tough balance to strike for young soldiers who must fend off ambushes in one moment and act as ambassadors of counterinsurgency in the next.

At one family’s mud compound this month, an American soldier who was keeping watch up on a shed roof accidentally broke a chunk off as he climbed down. The soldiers

casually apologized without offering compensation for the broken roof. A minor incident, but still one that upset the family and did little to build their faith in the soldiers.

At another family compound where soldiers heard there might be weapons, an elderly patriarch showed the soldiers around as his wife and children stood off in a corner in fear. Suddenly, as the father disappeared around a corner with the soldiers, the children began crying, believing that he was being taken away. He returned moments later, to gasps of relief from the children.

Meanwhile, in another area of the village, Sgt. First Class Meacham sat down to tea with a family, and Captain Schwengler wrestled a village man as residents cheered. He then gave school supplies to children.

By the end of the patrol, Captain Schwengler's company had hauled away a 155-millimeter artillery shell that a mother and her daughters had led the soldiers to.

The Americans had also helped the Afghan forces take away a man who an Afghan intelligence officer believed was related to a local Taliban judge, but who a group of villagers said was a Kuchi — a Pashtun nomad. As the man was taken away, the village children who earlier had smiled when the soldiers arrived now wore expressions that were full of uncertainty.