

A NATO Bid to Regain Afghans' Trust

Airstrikes

By Pamela Constable
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PANJWAI, [Afghanistan](#) -- The road to this southern Afghan farming town is wide, smooth and utterly empty, except for an occasional old man on a bicycle or a meandering herd of baby camels.

It was paved last year with Japanese funds, to help farmers send their grapes to market and to make it easier for patients to reach hospitals in the city of Kandahar, 20 miles to the east. But that was before war came to Panjwai, making its name synonymous with the physical destruction and political mayhem wrought by months of Taliban attacks and NATO bombing.

Now almost no one dares to drive on the road. NATO forces declared victory here in late September, claiming to have killed about 1,500 insurgents in a campaign named Operation Medusa. Yet Taliban fighters still linger in the surrounding orchards and launch sporadic attacks. On Monday, insurgents fired at several NATO bases in the district, although no one was injured.

Many shops in Panjwai remain shuttered, and most of the estimated 80,000 people who fled nearby villages have not returned. Some harbor bitter memories of NATO bombings that destroyed their homes and fruit crops. At least 50 civilians were killed over several weeks of bombing, and President Hamid Karzai last month ordered an investigation into the deaths. NATO officials have said the insurgents used villagers' homes as shelter, provoking the deadly airstrikes.

"I lost three of my sons, my brother, my wife, two daughters-in-law and many grandchildren," said Abdullah Shah, a white-haired farmer, wiping his eyes with a dirty shawl. "I moved the whole family into a tent for safety when the fighting started. The international forces said there were 20 Taliban in that tent, but it was not true. How could there be, when we were so crowded already?"

In an effort to regain public trust, NATO forces have moved into Panjwai with bricks, bulldozers and lots of cash. Local men have been hired to repair damaged buildings, the renovated high school reopened last week, and a new road is being laid from the town to several grape-growing villages that suffered the heaviest bombing damage.

NATO has pledged \$8 million to improve Panjwai and the adjacent Zhari district, in hopes of creating a Taliban-proof development zone and a model for other post-conflict areas. Canadian troops have set up a base above the town and patrol the bazaar in armored convoys, while NATO officers meet often with local elders.

"Panjwai is a microcosm. The key is to move fast once the fighting stops, work with local institutions, get development projects going and get local people involved in their own security," said Maj. Steve

Murray, deputy commander of a military reconstruction team in Kandahar. "We can fight the Taliban until the cows come home, but we can't make the area safe if we don't deal with the other issues."

Last Tuesday, a Canadian officer arrived as bulldozers were clearing land for the new road. He was soon surrounded by frowning farmers who demanded extra money to let the road cross their fields. The mayor joined the negotiations, calculating acreage on a pad of paper. The officer politely insisted on the previously agreed price.

In the chilly Panjwai bazaar, turbaned men huddling around sidewalk teapots raised more serious issues. They expressed deep ambivalence about the presence of international troops and both fear of and admiration for the Taliban insurgents.

"The coalition forces have brought us nothing but problems. They enter our houses and mosques without permission," said Abdul Jan Mohammed, a grape grower whose vineyards were damaged by NATO airstrikes. "The Taliban don't want to fight. They are just tired of all the corruption, as we are."

Bismillah, 45, whose farm is a half-hour walk from town, said his neighbors had begun to return home since the bombing ended but that insurgents were still lurking nearby. Like many Afghans, Bismillah uses just one name.

"Everything is confused now," he said. "At night we hear shooting and rockets, and we cannot light our lamps for fear of the Taliban. But if a mine explodes on the road, the army and coalition forces come and pressure us to find out who did it. The best thing to do is negotiate, but the Taliban will never negotiate as long as the foreign troops stay here."

One obstacle to security is the shortage of Afghan police and soldiers in the region. In terms of size and competence, the new national army and police force have lagged far behind what officials hoped for, so the government recently began recruiting and training local auxiliary police officers to serve in conflict zones such as Kandahar province.

The program has drawn praise and criticism. It gives men in poor rural areas an income and a vested interest in protecting their communities. But recruitment standards are low, training is cursory, and many who sign up are rejected because of hashish use or other habits.

Commander Ehsanullah Alizai, the provincial police chief, said that local elders and district officials are choosing applicants for the new force and that each recruit is further vetted by his office. But he acknowledged that the two weeks of training they will get are far from adequate.

"Of course it is not enough. It takes a lot of time and education to become a police officer. But this is an emergency," Alizai said, adding that 250 of the expected 1,000 new police officers have completed training and started work. "The security situation in Panjwai and Zhari was getting worse, and the government had to take action."

But the threat of further NATO bombing has not stopped the Taliban from launching new attacks, often against civilians. Last month, two insurgents on a motorbike ambushed Fazel Mahmud, a Panjwai elder, as he was taking his daughter to a doctor in Kandahar. Mahmud, who works with a government program that helps local insurgents return to civilian life, was shot in the neck and throat but survived after surgery at a NATO base.

"The local Taliban are sons of our soil, but the Taliban trained by al-Qaeda see all Afghans as infidels and Americans. They do not want any reconciliation," said Mahmud, who now speaks with a lisp. He said he saw many wounded Taliban fighters being treated at the NATO field hospital, where he said they cursed the medical staff and refused to eat.

In a second recent attack, insurgents opened fire on a clinic at a camp for nomads and refugees beside the highway from Kandahar to Panjwai and briefly kidnapped the doctor. Now the clinic building sits abandoned beside the colony of patched tents and thorn-bush camel corrals.

On Tuesday, several women in the refugee camp said they had fled there after airstrikes on their villages near Panjwai. One woman, Badro, shrieked and wept, saying two of her brothers and all the family's sheep and camels had been killed.

"Everyone is a witness. There were no Taliban there at all," she cried, shaking a fist. "The dead bodies of my family are still there. It is not safe to collect the pieces."

[On Sunday, a Pakistani suicide bomber detonated himself in Paktika province, killing 15 people and wounding 24, including an Afghan special forces commander, the Associated Press reported.]

The Afghan government has made efforts to console and aid survivors in Panjwai. Abdullah Shah said he was paid about \$8,000 as compensation for his dead relatives. He was also taken to Kabul, where he said Karzai gave him a hug and promised him a new house.

Last week, the minister of rural development flew to Kandahar and met with a large group of elders from Panjwai, asking what they needed most. He was accompanied by Christopher Alexander, deputy U.N. representative for Afghanistan, who told them the goal was to transform their region "from this year's battlefield to next year's construction ground."

The delegation did not visit Panjwai because it was considered too dangerous, but Alexander said elders from several villages told him security was better because young men who had been fighting for the Taliban were now earning money on NATO construction projects. He also noted that several elders did not attend the Kandahar meeting, suggesting that they were suspicious of the government and sympathetic to the insurgents.

Mahmud, a fruit grower who remained in Panjwai that day, complained bitterly that the residents were

trodden upon by everyone.

"We don't support the Taliban, but we don't want the foreign troops here, either," he said. "I blame President Karzai, too. If we had laws and honest government in this country, the Taliban wouldn't be fighting."

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