

Some hope is still alive in beleaguered Kandahar

The general commentary on Afghanistan sketches a somewhat depressing, even hopeless portrayal of a war that is said to have reached a strategic stalemate. To a large extent, these prescriptions are merited. That the war is not going well is accepted by all. Increasing domestic pressures have led the Dutch to cut and run, with the Canadians soon to follow.

Indeed, the loss of strategic momentum can be traced to the salons of Washington and London. In their respective election campaigns, both President Barack Obama and Prime Minister David Cameron used forceful rhetoric to define Afghanistan as a "key battleground". Once elected, the heroism of the two campaign candidates was almost immediately lost to the so-called real political considerations of elected leadership. As one British official closely associated with Cameron's inner coterie states, "The question (of withdrawal) is not when, but how fast." Contrary to what might be called the God's eye view, the worm's eye perspective is somewhat more optimistic. For development gurus, western military personnel, and various Afghan agencies working on the ground, there is much to be proud of. Sanguinity, in a cause few politicians can grasp, is based on fact rather than spin. The dying passion in Whitehall or Capitol Hill is converted into infatuation for those individuals involved in the everyday business of change. The story of Kandahar provides a sneak preview to another side of this conflict, where hope is yet to be lost.

The current campaign for Kandahar City (KC) and the neighbouring environs of Arghandab, Zharay, and Panjwa'i, all located in southern Afghanistan, has been labelled Hamkari — the Dari word for togetherness. The idea is for the Afghan Na-



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tional Police (ANP), Afghan National Army (ANA), and the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to work collectively to bolster governance in the Taliban's former spiritual, if not physical heartland.

Kandahar is by far the most complicated and politically charged environment to conduct a campaign for what is commonly referred to as "stabilisation": allowing the Afghan Government rather than parallel actors to influence outcomes. The insurgency is more local in nature, where, to some extent, the lack of infrastructure and opportunity shapes behav-

our. Mullah Omar and the Taliban as "we" know it, operating out of the badlands of Pakistan, are concepts for most local Kandaharis. Criminal gangs and power brokers matter more than the ominous "Taliban". Indeed, the fact that President Hamid Karzai's half brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, lives in KC complicates the political dynamics associated with Hamkari.

This notwithstanding, in the past 12 months, much has changed in Kandahar. Tooryalasi Wesa, the erstwhile weak and ineffective provincial governor appears to have been empowered. With greater degrees of sup-

port from Kabul, Wesa is seen holding local Shuras — or meetings — and engaging local elders. His job is to cement the idea of governance in the minds and streets of Kandahar. This is no mean feat. Propaganda needs to be supported by deed. Luckily for Wesa, the deed exists in the form of visible administrative structures and infrastructural development.

Ever since ISAF made KC a priority, the city has been divided into ten sub-districts. Each sub-district consists of municipal administrators, a police chief, and representatives of the military. Essentially, now there exists a platform for Kandaharis to complain about water, electricity, or the dysfunctional manner in which the city is governed. That people complain needs to be understood as progress. The ability to protest says something about the burgeoning sense of comfort enjoyed by local inhabitants. As one American development official in Kandahar tells me, "Wesa's growing popularity has allowed him to be bold." Recently, the governor took the decision to clear an illegal market to build a school. The symbolism attached to this endeavour is unmistakable, a direct affront to Kalashnikov toting fanatics who view education as a sign of modernity, and hence, a mark of their irrelevance.

Further, in terms of infrastructural development, Hamkari has paid focus on the need to electrify KC and create the conditions to boost trading opportunities between Kandahar and Pakistan, through the trading gate at Spin Boldak. Some 50 km south of KC, the crossing at Chaman-Weesh in southern Kandahar has increased the potential for local traders to take their goods across the border to Quetta and onto the ports of Karachi.

The somewhat positive perception of security in the bor-

der areas results from reforms within the ANA. Recruited from mainly northern Afghanistan, the Tajik heavy ANA posted in KC are seen as less corrupt than their locally recruited ANP counterparts. Indeed, the military-police dynamic holds true for most parts of South Asia. This should not take away from the fact that at least one of the two security actors in the South is responsive to local needs.

As far as electricity is concerned, the key deliverables have centred on diesel generators to supply power in the immediate term. Compared to only a few years ago, the provision of electricity has lit both streets and markets. While a lot more needs to be done to increase generator capacity from the existing 20-30 MWs to 150-175 MWs, the fact that electricity has come to KC is remarked by all. Whether this goodwill can be sustained, depends as much upon local actors as those of the wishes and fancies of Western electorates.

As in other parts of Afghanistan, the greatest irony of the efforts in KC are that just as the governance piece is beginning to gain momentum, the strategic concerns of American and European political tsars have shifted focus. Steered by ever sceptical journalists and broadcasters, what these leaders fail to see is that progress — or relative progress — has already come to Afghanistan. The key is to turn progress into political speak for success, allowing the quiet agents of change to continue their mission minus the stratagem following the much talked about mid-term elections in the US or the less noticed political tensions within Whitehall.

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An Afghan man speaks with a US soldier from Delta Company near the village of Mohammad D'Jakub, Arghandab river valley, Kandahar province, on Monday. REUTERS