

# AFGHANISTAN UPDATE

by Rory Kilburn



DND IS2008-9255 by Corporal David Critch

Warrant Officer Dube and Master Corporal Thomsen, Force Protection Members, help an Afghan worker haul his wheelbarrow up a sheer rock face during the construction of a new bridge near the Dahla Dam, 20 November 2008.

## Introduction

In August 2008, I redeployed to Canada after working with the Strategic Advisory Team (SAT) in Kabul, Afghanistan for one year. During that year, I had worked on a daily basis with the Ministry of Education, conducting capacity-building in that organization. Although you may ask what a military officer was doing in the Ministry of Education, in actual fact I was teaching Afghan civil servants management and planning functions. You see, there is no professional civil service – as we know it – in that country, and, more importantly, there is no functioning middle management layer. And so I found myself helping build the Afghan civil service, a few people at a time.

By way of background, the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) is the framework for rebuilding that war-torn nation. There are three pillars in the rebuilding process: Security, supported by the international military and police forces; Governance, the Rule of Law and Human Rights, supported by government development agencies and non-government

organizations (NGOs); and Economic and Social Development, supported by government development agencies, NGOs, and the private sector. The SAT worked in the second and third pillars, attempting to build capacity within the Afghan government. In all three pillars, the Afghans are to be the face of the rebuilding efforts. These rebuilding efforts are moving ahead, albeit slowly, but I believe the international community is making some fundamental errors in the course of their efforts. To explain this viewpoint, I will now take you on a short journey through Afghan culture and daily life.

## Afghanistan Time

You probably have heard the oft-repeated phrase from the Taliban: “...the West has the watches, but we have the time.” While they are referring to the attention span of Western governments and societies, it is also true that time in Afghanistan does not carry quite the same meaning as it does in Canada. When I first arrived at the ministry, I was quite appalled by the fact that an Afghan routinely would enter a planned

meeting 10 to 15 minutes late. As a military officer, I had been taught to arrive early for a meeting. In Afghanistan, however, nobody seemed to get very fussed about arriving on time. Being a curious sort, I started watching what was going on at all meetings and workshops to see if I could determine why they were always late. Most Afghans do not wear watches, but they all carry cell phones, so not knowing the time was not an excuse. I thought perhaps because much of Afghanistan was an agrarian society they measured time in the seasons, rather than in minutes and seconds as we do in the West. But that theory did not hold water, as the Afghans that I worked with were quite urban, and many had studied and worked outside the country – at western universities and for Western NGOs. While they understand the importance of being on time in a Western sense, they do not necessarily agree with timeliness as a priority. The key to understanding Afghan time lies in their social structure.

Afghan society, being tribal, is built upon the foundations of family bloodlines and trust. The tribe almost always sticks together, since they are family. Family is virtually everything in Afghanistan. Trust is the other building block of the society. While the Afghans may trust family immediately, outsiders need time to earn the trust of the tribal members.

Because of the structure of Afghan society, time in Afghanistan is not about minutes and seconds; it is about relationships. If the person they are conversing with is important to them, then they will invest time in that relationship. If the person they are talking to is to be trusted, then it is only proper to demonstrate to them the importance of that trust. To an Afghan, the relationship is more important than being on time for a meeting – especially if that someone is not as important in the larger scheme of things. To an Afghan, time is not money. Rather, time is relationship building, about building and maintaining trust.

In Afghanistan and in Afghan society, the time spent in relationship building translates into a trust that will buy more security than will money, and will allow one to operate effectively within the Afghan tribal structure. When one has the trust of the Afghans, one can do many things. Without that trust, an individual is just another occupying force, and will be treated as all other occupying forces have been treated in Afghanistan's history – which is to say, badly.

### Afghanistan Life

Afghanistan and its people are a study in contrasts. It is a beautiful country, with oases of green nestled among some of the most forbidding desert mountains in the world. It has large cities and tiny villages, and is multicultural in many ways. It has, after all, been the crossroads between the Middle East and the Orient, a trading nation, and a throughway for invasions of richer lands. Descendants of the Macedonians of Alexander the Great and the Mongols of Genghis Khan have settled in the country, and have become part of its rich tapestry. The Afghans have resisted invaders – sometimes successfully, as occurred with the British and the Soviets, and sometimes not. However, they have adopted ideas and customs from other cultures, and adapted them to suit living under an Islamic culture in a forbidding land. Throughout their history, they have resisted the imposition of foreign ideas, but have gladly embraced foreign ideas that have thrived in their culture. Therefore, to be successful in our dealings with the Afghans, the SAT members had to resist the tendency to impose ideas, and, instead, had to lay out a menu of options, allowing them to take what they wanted.

Afghans are proud, yet humble individuals. They are intelligent; they are hard-working; and, most importantly, they are a sovereign people. In my dealings with the Afghans during my year in the country, I learned that to be successful, one must propose an idea or a way of doing something, and then wait. The Afghans would think about things, and then come back to you with a viewpoint as to how to adapt the concept to their circumstances. The next step was to help them implement their concept, slowly building their capacity to sustain



In Zarakalay, Captain Geoff Marshall (left) of the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team (KPRT) discusses village improvements with elders.

DND IS2007-7437 by Master Corporal Kevin Paul

the process so that it became their way of doing business. This manner of doing things requires time, and it means that any given individual cannot implement a lot of concepts in one brief year. However, if one were to implement the processes and procedures properly, and build their capacity, the Afghans would be both willing and able to implement follow-on concepts with ever-lessening support.

### Afghanistan Death

On 15 December 2007, a rocket attack was launched at the Kabul City Police Headquarters early in the morning. It missed the police station and, instead, struck a local market. Five Afghans were killed, and many more wounded. I was in the Ministry of Education building, which is about 500 metres from the station, and we all felt the building shake. We knew immediately that it was an explosion, but did not know precisely where it had occurred. Five minutes later, there were two more tremendous explosions – both of which were very close. That was a truck, loaded with rockets, exploding near the gates of the Police Headquarters in a follow-on attack. When I looked out a window a few minutes later, I could see the burning hulk of the truck bomb just 500 metres away.

The disconcerting thing about this attack was the reaction of the Kabulis. When the large bomb detonated, everyone fled the scene. Within 15 minutes of the bomb explosions, when it was clear that nothing further was going to occur, the roadside markets were again doing a brisk business. People got on with their lives very rapidly. I did not know if I should feel *impressed with* or *sad for* them. There has been so much death and destruction in the country in the past decades that people have become inured to the violence. While not true of all individual Afghans, as a nation I found them a hardened people. It was both a strength and a weakness in my dealings with them – a strength in that they could bear up in almost any circumstance, and get a job done. It was a weakness in the sense that, for many of them, their expectations of the government and their own efforts are very low.

### Afghanistan and Internationals

In preparation for the deployment, and while in Afghanistan, I read at least a dozen books on the history of the country. All aver that while Afghanistan is at the centre of the current maelstrom, it is not the problem. From my viewpoint, and I can only speak for myself on this issue, the problems in Afghanistan are caused by surrounding countries, and by the legions of international workers in Afghanistan who generally believe that they have all the answers and are unwilling to learn from the Afghans. I will not comment upon regional politics in this short dissertation, but I will discuss the efforts of the international community.

Afghanistan is not so much a country as it is a patchwork of competing tribes. Putting a government together here has nothing to do with the effectiveness of the appointees. Rather, it consists of ‘buying’ the support of various tribes and ethnic groups by making sure they are represented in the government at various levels. The Durranis have stayed in power, and continue to stay in power, not by force of character, but by sharing government positions with other tribes who can either help them, or must be kept close for other reasons. Afghans believe in the philosophy, “Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.” Although the West complains that many warlords and war criminals are in government, there is a reason for that. It has either to do with alliances, or keeping somebody close enough to keep a watchful eye upon them. The international community will not change these realities of Afghan politics. The tribal culture is too entrenched, and centuries of invasion and war have taught them that their culture is one of their strongest survival tools.

The largest part of the international community in Afghanistan is the aid industry. There are NGOs in Afghanistan that are doing very good work, and that are making a difference in the lives of ordinary Afghans. However, the majority of the international consultants are in Afghanistan to make money. Therefore, it is not in their interest to build capacity, as that direction of effort would put them out of a job. Their self-interest lies in replacing capacity, doing their best to make themselves indispensable to the ministries, and thus maintaining their high-paying jobs. The aid industry also posts on websites the pictures of the infrastructure they have built, in essence saying: “We built a school for girls. Send us more money and we will build more schools like this.” It is something that donors and taxpayers understand, and something they will continue to support. It is much harder to post a picture of a lowly civil servant, and say: “See what we developed. Send us more money and we will develop and train more people like him or her.” Infrastructure improvements are highly visible, represent good PR value, and are relatively easy to do for the international community. Social and human capital development is much more difficult, much slower, and, with respect to the long-term health of the country, is much more important than infrastructure. The international community is too focused upon reconstructing Afghanistan – i.e. building buildings. In other words, the international community has to stop trying to rebuild Afghanistan, and start rebuilding Afghans.

Finally, the international community came into the country to build a democratic state in a nation that has no democratic tradition, and it imposed democracy ‘from the top down.’ This imposed structure introduced one of the weaknesses of Western democracies: the short-term focus on rapid output. Politicians in both the West and in Afghanistan are totally focused upon producing visible results as rapidly as possible. This translates into signature

## VIEWS AND OPINIONS

projects, a focus upon infrastructure, and doing things for the Afghans because it is faster. This short-term focus cheats all Canadians in the long term, because what is being built is not sustainable by the Afghans. The international community is building a state of dependency, rather than an independent state. However, the international community has largely neglected the necessary rebuilding of the social and human capital of Afghanistan.

### Whither Canada in Afghanistan

So what does this all mean for Canada and our efforts in Afghanistan? To make progress in Afghanistan takes time. It takes relationship building. And, it takes trust. It means doing things *with* the Afghans, not *for* them. It means judging them through the lens of their history as a crossroads for invasion, through 30 years of unremitting conflict and death, and not from our relatively peaceful history of few conflicts on our own soil. And it means doing things differently from all the other nations in Afghanistan – working to their agenda, not ours.

The Afghan people know what they *want* to do, and they know what they *have* to do. They need Canadian skills and knowledge to support them on their

journey. Afghanistan is not our country, and it will never be a clone of a Western democracy. It can, however, become an Afghan democracy built by the Afghans who will adopt and adapt practices that work for them.

Many discussions here in Canada are framed in the context of supporting our troops. I believe this is the wrong discussion. The Canadian presence in Afghanistan should be about supporting the people of Afghanistan, and giving them the tools to rebuild their country. The people of Afghanistan have the same hopes as do the people of Canada. They want their children to grow up in a safe, secure, and loving environment. They want peace, order, and good government without the heavy hand that they have experienced over the past ‘30-some’ years. They want their country back. I believe Canada can help best by showing the international community how to do things differently.

---

Lieutenant-Colonel (ret'd) Rory Kilburn is a former Canadian Forces navigator and senior staff officer. Prior to deployment to Afghanistan, he was Senior Staff Officer Non-Commissioned Member Professional Development at the Canadian Defence Academy in Kingston.



The nearly-completed pump house and cistern, the end-result of the KPRT's efforts in Zarakalay.