

## For Afghan police, staying alive is the first priority

COLIN FREEZE

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**ZHARI, AFGHANISTAN** — When the sun rose over Kandahar yesterday, 10 Afghan police officers were found dead in their compound, killed in the middle of the night.

It was an all-to-common massacre. Suspected Taliban insurgents stormed an Afghan National Police checkpoint west of Kandahar at around 3:30 a.m., according to a police chief. They shot the ANP guardsmen, then entered the compound and killed everyone sleeping inside.

Cop killings occur with such frequency here that they barely register as news.

After the sun set over Kandahar, greater fanfare surrounded another event. Visiting Canadian politicians were wrapping up their trip, once again expressing hopes that the local security forces would hurry up and find their feet.

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"At the end of the day, the goal is that they will take care of their country on their own," federal Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion told reporters.

For NATO countries and their politicians, it has become a mantra: As soon as the Afghans become security self-sufficient, then Western soldiers will get out. But several days spent recently at one ANP outpost shows just how far this goal is from reality, as well as the struggles the police face to become self-sufficient.

"Now, there is not real police in our country," said Mohammed Khan Safai, commander of the police substation in Pashmul, an outpost outside Kandahar. "In 10 years, I hope we will be real police."

For Afghan police, staying alive is job No. 1. The number of officers slain in the past year is an estimated 900 - and counting. They are now seen as the ultimate soft target by the Taliban. "If you're not alive then you can't do your job," Major Louis Lapointe, the soldier in charge of a Canadian Forces police-mentoring program, said in an interview.

His team has installed dozens of Canadian soldiers in six police substations, having them bunk beside the ANP members 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in a bid to provide both training and stepped-up security. The up-close-and-personal mentorship has opened the eyes of soldiers to a host of problems they hadn't seen before.

Substation Pashmul houses 15 fledgling officers. The Canadian soldiers who live and work here call them "the dream team," but they are marked less for greatness than for potential competence - which, in Kandahar, is about as good as it gets. The 15 officers share only six Kalashnikov assault rifles among them, so most go unarmed. Some have had a few weeks of police training, but most have had none at all.

The ANP officers are generally in their 20s and 30s, but the newest recruit is a chubby-cheeked orphan. His claims to be 18 are regarded as outlandish by his fellow officers.

The Pashmul squad's main job is to guard a strip of highway between two Canadian military bases, where they are tasked with spotting roadside bombs, running vehicle checkpoints, and inspecting surrounding villages. Until last month, however, they didn't have a vehicle.

Unlike most police in Afghanistan, the Pashmul squad has some literate members, a skill that has helped them identify Taliban from writings found during searches of the pockets of passersby. Still, the police remain outsiders; none of them speak the local language.

Local residents are almost all Pashtun, but the officers are all ethnic Hazaras, who trace their ancestry back to a single province in

northern Afghanistan. Canadian soldiers say these out-of-towners are seen as less corruptible than the local option.

But the Pashtun police masters in Kandahar who hold sway over the Hazaras' supplies and paycheques seem less enthusiastic about the crew.

Afghanistan's police brass is notorious for skimming, and the Pashmul group says that in their case, things are so bad that it's anyone's guess whether they'll each get their meagre monthly stipend of 3,500 Afghanis (about \$75).

The scant salaries belie the big dangers. Before the Canadians arrived to work with the police in this area, a previous ANP crew lived in a mud-wall complex about 150 metres away.

"Some sort of Taliban came into the old police substation and they killed everyone during the night - it was 13 ANP that was killed about a year ago," said Corporal Eric Dagenais, one of six soldiers at the new outpost. The bodies were strewn across the highway, he said. "It was to send a message: 'Don't send ANP here, we don't want them. We're the Taliban and we're in charge.' "

When Canada's Royal 22nd Regiment arrived in Kandahar last summer, the soldiers had different ideas about who was the boss. Their launch of a police-mentorship program coincided with the arrival of Commander Safai. Already serving with the ANP near Kabul, he headed south after hearing that some jobs had opened up near Kandahar.

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Phillip Crawley, Publisher