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THE THIRD WORLD WAR

Why NATO Troops Can't Deliver Peace in Afghanistan

By Ullrich Fichtner

Forty nations are embroiled in an unwinnable war in Afghanistan. Anyone who travels through the country with Western troops soon realizes that NATO forces would have to be increased tenfold for peace to be even a remote possibility.

Thirteen days before the next attempt on his life, Afghan President Hamid Karzai arrives at a cabinet meeting, surrounded by a swarm of bodyguards. He holds his shirt collar shut against the rainy cold in Kabul. It's a Monday in mid-April -- and while there may be some good news this morning, most of it is bad. The Canadians want Karzai to dismiss the governor of Kandahar, the United Nations contingent is missing 50,000 tons of food and the Kazakh ambassador is promising money for a hospital in Bamyan. A suicide bomber has blown himself up in Helmand, the Norwegian defense minister is visiting Kabul and the opium harvest has begun in southern Afghanistan. A cabinet meeting is about to begin in the presidential palace.

Karzai is the last to arrive, long after his ministers have gathered at the palace. Visitors must pass through four security checkpoints, walk through metal detectors three times and turn over their bags to be sniffed by dogs. It takes an hour to reach the innermost courtyard, where Karzai's palace -- the cheerful villa Gul Khana, set in a garden planted with cedar trees -- is located. When the president enters the room at 9 a.m., everyone sitting around the long conference table stands up, 28 men and one woman. This is the group that governs Afghanistan -- officially, at least.

To begin the meeting, an imam chants lengthy suras from the Koran. Then Karzai listens to a report from his defense minister, who has just returned from a trip to India. The president's demeanor is that of a royal leader. Instead of asking many questions, he simply gives orders. He is not wearing his trademark felt cap and brightly colored coat. Instead, he chairs the meeting in his shirtsleeves, and the demands he imposes on the cabinet are impossible. He wants the ministers to take immediate action against high food prices, he orders the transportation minister to finally bring security to the highway between Kabul and Kandahar, and he says: "It's raining in the north; at least that's good news."

At 10:15, a secretary wearing a pinstriped suit enters the room quietly, sidles along the table and hands the president a piece of paper. Karzai reads the note and nods. The aide leaves the room and returns with a telephone.

Karzai picks up the receiver, and when he speaks everyone in the room can hear him. "What? Pakistani troops have crossed the border? Where exactly? They're shooting with rockets? There is fighting?" The news descends on Karzai's mood like a hammer. He hangs up the phone, wipes his hand across his bald head and says: "I handed the students at the university their diplomas yesterday. That was a very good day."

Good days are in short supply in Afghanistan, a country at war -- or involved in several wars, to be exact. There is constant fighting on many fronts, hard and soft. The newspapers, and there are many of them in Kabul now, serve up pages of chaotic images every day. Their reports are about bombs and drinking water, holy warriors and wheat prices, NATO air attacks and schoolbooks, kidnapped children, refugees and bandits.

Almost seven years have passed since the overthrow of the Taliban regime, and in those seven years half of the world has tried to bring a better future and, most of all, peace to this new country, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. As part of the NATO military operation known as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), 40 nations have 60,000 soldiers deployed in the country. There are 26 United Nations organizations in Afghanistan, and hundreds of private and government agencies are pumping money, materials and know-how into the country's 34 provinces. But anyone seeking success stories or asking about failures will encounter reports that do not seem to be coming from the same country.

According to the speeches and statements Western military officials, diplomats and politicians are constantly churning out, the security situation has improved substantially, the military successes are obvious and the Taliban are as good as defeated. But peace and Afghanistan, say the Afghanis when speaking to a domestic

audience, are still two incompatible words.

Last year, 1,469 bombs exploded along Afghan roads, a number almost five times as high as in 2004. There were 8,950 armed attacks on troops and civilian support personnel, 10 times more than only three years earlier. One hundred and thirty suicide bombers blew themselves up in 2007. There were three suicide bombings in 2004.

There is no peace anywhere in Afghanistan, not even in the north, which officials repeatedly insist has been pacified. Anyone who travels the country -- making the obligatory rounds to its ministries, speaking with Western ambassadors, UN directors, ISAF commanders and provincial governors, and meeting with women's rights activists, narcotics officers and police chiefs -- is bound to return with many dark questions and an ominous feeling that this mission is not a task to be measured in years, but in decades, many decades.

A dramatic chapter in world history is being written in the process, in this country dominated by the Hindu Kush mountains and the formidable Sefid Kuh range, and the endless deserts of Kandahar and Helmand. The United States and Europe have stumbled their way into a new type of international war, one in which all of today's global and regional powers are involved. What will happen to NATO if it fails in the first out-of-area mission in its history? And where will the UN be if this ambitious nation-building project is ultimately a disappointment?

The country is in the grip of global interest-driven politics. It is, as so often in its history, a pawn on a chessboard surrounded by many more than two players. If the concerted efforts of the Western community are not delivering results as quickly as expected, this can be attributed partly to the fact that the efforts of one half of the world are constantly being thwarted by those of the other half.

While NATO tries to disarm the population, the flow of bazookas and guns coming into the country from Pakistan remains unabated. The Iranian government is accused of promoting the trade in Afghan opium and heroin to inflict harm on the West. Meanwhile, Russia is blamed for using its Soviet-era influence to weaken NATO, its old rival, on Afghan soil.

China, Afghanistan's easternmost neighbor, hopes to exploit untapped mineral sources in the nearby mountains. Dubai, the Liechtenstein of the Middle East, offers a place to launder and park dirty money. It is as if a first, crude world war of the 21st century were taking place on Afghan soil, a war that remains unacknowledged and undeclared.

"What We're Fighting For"

"Look at this," says ISAF Commander Dan McNeill, wearing sunglasses as he stands next to a Canadian C-130 transport plane about to take off from Kabul's military airport. "Look, take a picture of this. This here is what we're fighting for."

The general cuts through the delegation he is accompanying to Helmand in the south. He pushes aside Zalmai Rassoul, President Karzai's national security advisor, brushing past deputy interior ministers and even General Karimi, the chief of operations for the Afghan national army. On this hazy day, McNeill finally reaches the lone woman standing at the back of the group, an Afghan woman, wearing makeup and no veil.

McNeill presents her like a trophy, and says: "Here, this is it." The woman, a government employee who looks to be about 40, smiles shyly and gives the impression of wanting to be somewhere else. The four-star general, wearing his combat uniform, poses for a photograph with the woman. McNeill, in his last few days as ISAF commander and accustomed to giving orders, says: "Write about this. This is why we're here."

The flight to Helmand passes along mountain chains south of Kabul. Within about an hour, the plane lands at Camp Bastion, little more than a dusty airstrip in a vast, empty desert. The delegation from Kabul has to transfer to a helicopter to reach Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand Province. There they will meet with the new governor, Gulab Mangal, who has invited them to attend a grand shura, or council of elders, leaders and religious figures.

The travelers board two Sea Knight helicopters, which take them on a high-speed, low-altitude flight westward across a sea of opium poppy fields.

At the landing site, a soccer field, the guests board armored personnel carriers in groups of three and don bulletproof vests. Eventually the long convoy embarks on what amounts to a very short journey. The destination, the governor's official residence, is less than 300 meters from the soccer field, past Afghan

soldiers who line the street, saluting the visiting dignitaries. Leading up to the Helmand trip, McNeill had been brimming with success stories and rosy analyses. He said: "All neighboring countries are interested in regional stability." And he said that not a single child could attend school before the ISAF operation began, and that there are now 6 million schoolchildren in the country. Of course, the general added, there are still "volatile areas" along the border with Pakistan. But the security situation, he insisted, had "improved significantly."

He said the terrorists are, by and large, little more than a fractured bunch, no longer capable of launching substantial attacks. Those were the words of Dan McNeill, the words he used in his messages intended for a Western audience, the words he used in his standard speech, written for chancellors and prime ministers. But little of what the general said jibes with the reports he is now getting during his visit to Helmand.

Bomb Attacks, Roadside Bandits and Kidnappers

In an office behind closed doors, filled with furniture upholstered in a floral motif, the governor reports that half of the districts in his province are out of control. Alliances formed by the Taliban and drug barons, he says, rule the villages, and none of the highways are safe against bomb attacks, roadside bandits and kidnappers. According to Mangal, Pakistan has a finger in every pie here, driving the teachers from the schools (the ones that haven't been burned to the ground yet), and forcing farmers to plant opium poppies.

The delegates from Kabul listen and drink their tea. They are listening to familiar words, the words of reports meant for the Afghan and not the Western public, words that are brutally realistic and unadorned.

McNeill promises the governor that he is now able to send an additional 3,200 US Marines to Helmand, and that the British have also maximized their troop levels in the province. Things are moving forward, the general insists, and things will continue to move forward. Karzai's people promise money and show good faith.

The guests nibble on nuts and raisins, and after two hours the conversation begins to subside. "If you want people to produce melons instead of heroin, you have to give them a market for melons," says a man in the governor's group. No one even attempts to respond to his sentence. Food is brought in: soup, salad, flatbread and kebabs on long skewers. The armored personnel carriers are waiting outside. It's time for the guests to return to Kabul.

Three Million People Whose Livelihoods Depend on Opium

Since the fall of the Taliban regime almost seven years ago, the country's opium harvest has been more abundant in almost each successive year. Last year, 93 percent of the heroin traded in the world came from Afghanistan. In 2007, opium poppies were grown on 193,000 hectares (476,900 acres), a 17-percent increase over the previous year. Meanwhile, ISAF looks on without taking any action. But its inaction is a precautionary measure.

For fear of triggering hostility against foreign troops among the local population, the powers that be agreed early on that the Afghans would have sole responsibility for waging the drug war, with no NATO involvement whatsoever. To demonstrate their supposed commitment, the police and Afghan army occasionally stage symbolic drug burnings, and sometimes they even wade into the fields to decapitate a few plants. The operation, dubbed "eradication," is one of the most dangerous in this war.

The narcotics agents routinely face enemy fire. The drug mafia's militias, the Taliban and al-Qaida, launch perfectly planned counterattacks, almost as if someone had faxed them the government forces' plans in advance. Drugs and corruption go hand-in-hand in Afghanistan, where a policeman can count himself lucky if he earns €200 to €300 ($315 to $470) a month. When the harvest begins, even army officers shed their uniforms to work in the fields as pickers. Teachers moonlight as smugglers, mayors operate heroin laboratories and provincial governors have been stopped with 150 kilograms (331 pounds) of pure heroin in the trunks of their cars.

"We assume that 500,000 families have their fingers in the pie," says General Mohammed Daoud, once a young commander under the legendary mujahedeen leader Ahmed Shah Massoud. Today Daoud is the deputy interior minister in charge of running Kabul's anti-drug operation. "And if you consider that an Afghan family has at least six members," says Daoud, "you have 3 million people in our country whose livelihood depends on opium production." This contingent, one-tenth of the country's total population of 30 million, is much larger than any army in Afghanistan.

Daoud has 2,500 men under his command to wage his battle against the opium industry. Last year, his department arrested 820 smugglers, nabbed 20 corrupt army officers, destroyed 63 heroin laboratories and

removed tons of heroin from the market.

But when Daoud's people capture a few criminals, the arrests are nothing but symbolic. Afghanistan has never developed anything approaching an effective judicial system. There are no mechanisms in place to enforce sentences, and there are few lawyers and judges. Although the country supposedly has 1,500 prosecutors, only half of them have studied law. "We have certainly arrested people and sentenced them to 19 years in prison," says Daoud, "but all of them were released by the next day."

It is still 10 days before the next attempt on the life of Hamid Karzai. It is near the end of April, and there is good news and a lot of bad news. In Zabul and Ghazni, dozens of Taliban fighters are killed in battles with government troops, while Afghanistan's women's network expresses its concern over the growing number of children being forced into marriages. In Nimruz, a suicide bomber blows himself up in front of a mosque, killing 23 people. Germany promises additional millions of euros for police training. And in the Maiwand district of Kandahar Province, soldiers in the B Company of the Third Battalion of the British Parachute Regiment are preparing for a patrol.

The unit has received warnings that the enemy has planted remotely detonated bombs northeast of Hutal, in planning quadrant 9951. Hutal is a small district capital with about 7,000 residents living in mud huts, with no electricity or running water. The town has a bazaar along the main street, a school, a veterinarian and, in the north, an old fort that the British once tried to capture, albeit unsuccessfully, in the 19th century.

'We Know They're Out There Somewhere'

They arrived here in late March, the first Western troops to set foot in the area. The Canadians, who are in fact responsible for Kandahar, lacked the manpower to deploy troops to all of the districts in the province. When the British arrived, they expected to encounter resistance. They brought in 500 soldiers, vehicles and equipment, and on March 26 they stood, in the gaping desert north of Hutal, and proceeded to march westward into operations zones identified on their maps with names like "Birmingham," "Camberley" and "Thailand." But nothing happened.

They drove and marched for four days, hoping to flush out the enemy, but all they found were generators in "Burma," which they seized, and an enemy radio station in "Malaysia." But the fighters themselves, from the Taliban and other groups, were nowhere to be found. They turned to Hutal, where they wanted to establish a base, and were assigned three dilapidated concrete police buildings. It is a drafty, sandy outpost, where the men haven't shaved in five weeks and have had little opportunity to shower or even wash themselves, and where they spend much of their time lounging around, drinking instant tea from plastic bottles.

"They're hiding," says Major Stuart McDonald, a 35-year-old company commander with a Jesus-like face. At home, his daughter celebrated her third birthday three days ago, "which breaks my heart." He and his officers are standing on a makeshift veranda surrounded with sandbags, planning a patrol toward the northeast, where there could be bombs, and where they hope that they finally will be able to flush out the enemy.

"We know that they're out there somewhere," says McDonald. "They are observing us, but they're hiding. It's pathetic." His unit, known in Great Britain simply as "3 Para," is part of an elite force within the British Army.

At the beginning of the week, his men opened fire on a teenager on a moped who, with his brother sitting on the back, was foolishly driving in their direction. They could only conclude that he was a suicide bomber, because he ignored all gestures and all warnings, and simply continued driving toward them. The company doctor later tended to his wounds, and now the boy is up and walking in his village again, but the mood has deteriorated since then. The locals say that the foreign troops are shooting at their children.

The company's 6th Platoon, a group of 30 to 35 men, heads out on patrol, leaving the camp in loose formation, their guns at the ready, and turns toward the northeast. Since the moped shooting incident, the locals know that it's better to stop whenever they see soldiers. Now life comes to a sudden standstill as soon as the British appear. Cars stop and pedestrians freeze. Only on the highway do trucks and buses continue traveling. The buses are carrying migrant workers from around the country who have come to work in the opium harvest. There are hundreds of buses, traveling around the clock, many with German writing on the sides: "Prima Tours Günther" or "Alpina Express."

The soldiers cross a wide, dry riverbed where there are freshly dug graves marked by flags of mourning and the green color of the prophet. The air is hot and heavy with the stench of decay. Children, women and the elderly gather in front of dwellings along the route, standing still and staring at the soldiers. The foreigners

occasionally toss pieces of chewing gum or chocolate to the children. Every child here knows one English sentence by heart: "Mister, give me one dollar."

The soldiers have soon reached the desert, a landscape of sand and stone stretching to the horizon, which is part of enemy territory near the road and may be mined. They are in planning quadrant 9951. The paratroopers stop to rest. It is hot and each of them is carrying 60 pounds of equipment. They kneel in the sand and drink from their canteens. Then they continue marching, without making enemy contact, in a wide arc back to the camp.

The Taliban and their allies have learned that man-to-man combat with NATO troops isn't worthwhile. Anyone who attacks a US platoon or a British unit directly will likely face the devastating firepower of Apache helicopters within minutes. This realization has led to the development of a ghostly indirect war, a war by remote control, conducted with booby traps, land mines, home-made explosives and cars turned into bombs. It is a lopsided contest.

The Western troops, most of them still trained to conduct land-based wars the way warfare was waged at the beginning of the 20th century, are faced with an adversary that carries guerilla tactics to the extreme. The Taliban, whoever they are, are not bound by any NATO doctrine, and certainly not by the Geneva Convention. According to their logic, the mass murder of civilians can be counted as a victory. Blowing up the guests at a wedding can provide strategic advantages, while television images of dead children become a dirty bomb in the battle for public opinion.

ISAF Flags Provide Illusion of Success

In the evening, the British play volleyball in their camp. The pitch is delineated with pieces of rope on the ground, while a burning pile of garbage smolders in an adjacent hole in the ground. One in four soldiers suffers from chronic diarrhea, and all of them have sunburns. Major McDonald is pleased, he says, "that this vacation here will soon be over."

The paratroopers are getting ready to move on to Helmand, where they will join up with US Marines. A Portuguese company will replace them at the Hutal camp. Two of the Portuguese commanding officers visited the camp at noon. Since then, Major McDonald's mood has worsened significantly.

The Portuguese were not satisfied with the condition of the camp. They asked their British counterparts whether it would be possible to set up an Internet café prior to their arrival. They also wanted an ice machine and an ATM. "An Internet café," says McDonald, "and an ice machine, now that's impressive."

The next attempt on the life of Hamid Karzai is still nine days away. April days are hot in Kandahar, as the Portuguese move into the camp at Hutal. An advance guard arrives in the early morning hours in Humvees with the Portuguese flag fluttering from the antennas, looking like victors entering captured enemy territory.

The Portuguese soldiers pose in front of their vehicles in groups, taking pictures to send home and behaving as if they were on vacation. McDonald, the British major, stands there, looking disgusted. He hands over command of the camp to his successor, the Portuguese commander Antonio Cancelinha. When the two men shake hands, they look as if they hoped to never cross paths again.

DER SPIEGEL

Graphic: Mission Impossible?

Anyone standing in front of a map of Afghanistan, with shading delineating the five ISAF regional commands, must conclude that the country is under control. Colorful little flags identify the NATO troops' presence throughout the country, with Germany's colors flying in the northeast, Italy's in the far west, the Stars and Stripes covering the east, and the Union Jack and Canada's Maple Leaf blanketing the south. Interspersed among these flags are those of the Turks, the Dutch, the Lithuanians, Australians, Swedes and Spaniards. But the flags are an illusion.

ISAF Commander McNeill has said himself that according to the current counterterrorism doctrine, it would take 400,000 troops to pacify Afghanistan in the long term. But the reality is that he has only 47,000 soldiers under his command, together with another 18,000 troops fighting at their sides as part of Operation Enduring Freedom, and possibly another 75,000 reasonably well-trained soldiers in the Afghan army by the end of the year. All told, there is still a shortfall of 260,000 men.

Large, intricately subdivided tables hang on the wall at ISAF headquarters in Kabul. The charts indicate which troops, from which country, can be used for which operations -- or, conversely, are barred from engaging in certain operations. Very few units can be used for everything, including combat missions. In conversation, General McNeill says that NATO is running "on reserve" in Afghanistan. Otherwise, he says, cooperation is "generally quite good."

Good News and a Lot of Bad News

Seven days still remain before the next attempt on Hamid Karzai's life, and on this day the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) are launching a vaccination campaign in Kabul. In only three days, their goal is to vaccinate 7 million Afghan children against polio. There is good news and a lot of bad news.

In Pakistan, the army has begun razing the 30-year-old Jalozai refugee camp, which had provided shelter for 80,000 Afghans, who will now be forced to return home, joining a flood of millions of other refugees. In Kandahar, five policemen are killed by an improvised mine. In Paktiam, the Taliban have kidnapped two trucks loaded with military equipment, and in Khost the teachers at 15 schools are on strike because they haven't been paid in months. A petite woman named Habiba Sarabi is sitting in the tearoom at the Serena Hotel in Kabul.

She is the governor of Bamyan Province, the country's only female governor. Her region is one of the poorest in a poorhouse of a country. The topography is too mountainous for ordinary farming, the weather is too cold for decent harvests, in the winter the region is often cut off from the outside world for four months at a time, and even in the summer it is relatively inaccessible.

In some parts of Bamyan, 99 percent of residents can neither read nor write. A man is considered wealthy if he owns a mule, and anyone who falls seriously ill is given up for lost. This is the life that 90,000 people lead.

The Italians have promised to build a new road to Kabul, crossing the Hajigag Pass into Wardak Province, but no one has even broken ground yet. Habiba Sarabi says: "We need the wisdom to take advantage of this opportunity, or else we will fail once again, and this time it will be permanent."

That opportunity, she says, is the world's current interest in Afghanistan, an interest that Sarabi is convinced will not last. People are weary, she says, and even former members of the Taliban have laid down their weapons. "There is a development taking place, but it began 'at zero,'" says Sarabi.

A native of Mazar-i-Sharif, she an ethnic Hazara and she's a good woman who knows how to give straightforward answers to simple questions, and who doesn't sugarcoat anything. After studying medicine in Kabul and India, she fled from the Taliban regime in 1996, taking her family with her to Peshawar in neighboring Pakistan. When the Taliban later destroyed the famed Bamiyan Buddhas, she read about the incident in the newspaper.

When President Karzai offered her the governorship three years ago, Sarabi accepted without hesitation. She is undeterred by the fact that death threats are now part of her life, and that other governors refuse to interact with her because she is a woman. "We will also change the brains of men in Afghanistan," she says, "it will take a long time, but it will happen."

Cheerful Little Corners in a Down-at-its-Heels City

Six days before the next attempt on the life of Hamid Karzai, two US military trucks come under rocket fire in Khost, and in Faizabad a delivery truck containing 9,000 schoolbooks plunges into the Kokcha River. The police defuse a car bomb in Paktia, and in Kabul Chris Alexander, political director of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), walks across the marketplace to have dinner at the Boccaccio Restaurant.

Alexander is 39, a boyish-looking Canadian, and pundits at home in Canada predict that he has an important political career in his future. He has already been his country's ambassador in Kabul and he worked in Moscow for several years. The World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, chose him as a "Young Global Leader," a distinction that he acknowledges with a shy smile. He orders beef Carpaccio and pizza, while he and his friends at the table discuss the situation.

Drinking Chianti, the four friends, young businessman and diplomats, occasionally glance to the side to greet cabinet ministers who are also fond of dining at Boccaccio. At the surrounding tables, American intelligence agents cut their steaks, Swedish embassy employees load their forks with spaghetti, and bodyguards from

New Zealand drink Corona beer. It is a collection of the members of Kabul's parallel world, envoys of a many thousand-headed army of helpers and mercenaries. After dinner, they go to La Cantina for a cocktail or to Bella Italia for dessert. Kabul, an otherwise down-at-the-heels city, has its cheerful little corners, populated almost exclusively by foreigners from around the world.

Alexander tells the story of how 40 convoys from the World Food Program disappeared last year, somehow, somewhere, entire columns of trucks loaded with food and medicine. Forty civilian aid workers were killed, he says, and 89 were abducted.

Yes, says Alexander, there is a lot of bad news, but there is also good news to report. "We had less than 1,000 schools here in 2001. Today there are 9,000, which is quite impressive."

The conversation at the table soon turns to the Karzai government. It has been in office for six years, but has failed to produce any presentable successes. Two-thirds of the ministries are hopelessly corrupt, they say, the cabinet is split along ethnic lines. As for Karzai? Merely the mention of his name is a source of amusement. He is seen as nothing but a weak, paranoid leader.

Karzai, the Mayor of Kabul

Five days before the next attempt on the life of Hamid Karzai, anti-drug officers in Baghlan incinerate 300 bottles of hard liquor, 94 kilograms of opium, 93 kilograms of hashish and 13 kilograms of heroin. In the afternoon, Foreign Minister Rangin Dadfar Spanta, who returned to the country from exile in Germany, says that he considers the lack of faith in democracy in his country to be his "personal nightmare." On that same afternoon, General Khodaidad, the minister in charge of the government's anti-drug policies, takes a drive out into the countryside.

Khodaidad perches majestically in a four-ton, armor-clad Toyota Land Cruiser, as he embarks on a laborious two-day tour that will take him across thousands of kilometers of bumpy country roads and steep mountain passes.

The general is visiting the governors of Sar-e-Pol and Jowzjan in the far north, near the border with Turkmenistan. Parliamentarians from both regions are also along for the ride, as the Land Cruiser climbs through the icy splendor of the Salang Mountains, through Baghlan, Samangan and Balkh, traveling along the same route taken by the withdrawing Soviet army after almost 10 years of futile fighting.

Khodaidad was part of that army, a Soviet commander from Afghanistan, fighting for Afghanistan. He knows every valley and every hiding place here, and he knows the back roads that no American Humvee will ever take. Massoud was his adversary in the Pandjir Valley, as was General Daoud, who fought for the mujahedeen and is now a deputy interior minister, and with whom Khodaidad now cooperates in his effort to eradicate opium farming. "It's difficult for you to understand, isn't it? That we now work together? But the explanation is easy: We ruined this country together, and now we must rebuild it together."

Khodaidad has brought along a lot of music. He is a short, impish-looking man with eyes hidden behind fleshy eyelids. His glasses sit so crookedly on his face that he peers through the lens with one eye and over the top of the frame with the other, while the stereo blares the love songs of Afghan pop singer Nashena.

He periodically uses his walkie-talkie to confer with the other drivers in the convoy of five Land Cruisers, which includes an armed guard of 22 soldiers. A more prosperous and more peaceful Afghanistan soon begins to unfold: the north, where the land is farmed and where there is a rhythm to life, where dromedaries graze and children play -- children who look as though they had time to play.

Khodaidad is using the trip to promote his political agenda, which mainly consists in simply showing his face. The governors he meets, with whom he drinks tea, eats nuts and kebabs and spends entire evenings sitting barefoot on carpets, say that they haven't seen a cabinet minister in their provinces in two years. "Those who never leave Kabul," says Khodaidad, "lose their connections. But what is politics in Afghanistan? Nothing but connections. Have you heard what Karzai is called? The people call him the 'mayor of Kabul'..."

In Sar-e-Pol, late in the evening, Khodaidad's chief of current operations, Mohammed Ibrahim Azhar sits in the garden of the provincial government's guesthouse. One of his brothers died in the struggle against the Soviet occupiers and he lost three cousins in the war against the Russians. Azhar himself smuggled weapons and money into the country from Pakistan for the mujahedeen. Before taking his current position with the ministry, he worked for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Once a week, he meets with ISAF personnel and Americans to discuss strategy. But he and his foreign counterparts have little to say to each

other.

The Americans, says Azhar, refuse to understand that for many Afghans, there is no alternative to growing opium. "There is no market for wheat, rice, fruit or vegetables. We import all of these things, from Pakistan, Iran and China. What can you say to a farmer who makes $4,000 (€2,550) per hectare (2.47 acres) with opium and only $300 (€191) with wheat? A year!"

His telephone rings. His ring tone is the triumphant march from Verdi's "Aida." The people from Nangarhar are calling again. A suicide bomber blew up himself and 25 police officers in an opium field in Nangarhar that afternoon.

Three days before the next attempt on the life of Hamid Karzai, Ambassador William Wood is sitting in his large apartment in the fortress-like US embassy in Kabul. He asks the photographer not to take his picture while he smokes a cigarette. Wood arrived from Colombia last year. His knowledge of drug cultivation is extensive, but he doesn't know a whole lot about Afghanistan. His nickname is "Chemical Bill," because he doggedly champions a policy of large-scale aerial spraying of the poppy fields with pesticides to destroy the crops.

Wood says that Afghanistan's "drug tragedy" also feeds into the tragedy of terror. The ISAF countries, he says, should realize that they are losing more of their citizens to heroin than on the battlefield in Afghanistan. He adds that 2007 was a good year, all things considered, with the possible exception of corruption. All neighboring countries want regional stability, he says, adding that more than 6 million children now attend school in Afghanistan. It sounds as if he were giving a speech using McNeill's notes.

Two days before the next attempt on the life of Hamid Karzai, Najia Zewari, of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), says that Afghanistan actually looks very good on paper. Women's rights are guaranteed under the constitution, says Zewari, and they are part of the country's future development. One-fourth of the members of parliament are women but, she adds, "the daily reality is unfortunately a different story altogether."

More nine- and 10-year-old girls are being forced into arranged marriages once again, she says. Outside Kabul, almost all women over 13 are required to wear the burqa. According to Zewari, girls do not go to school, and no one reports kidnappings and rapes. "Do not misunderstand me," says Zewari, "it's a great thing that the terror of the Taliban is over. But that doesn't mean that their rules have disappeared. Their rules are the Afghan rules."

These Afghan rules are the rules that foreigners find so difficult to understand.

The overthrow of the Taliban took place just over seven years ago. Until well into the 1990s, the warlords and the mujahedeen were constantly at war and constantly forming new coalitions. In the area around Kabul, they conducted their own version of total war. The withdrawal of Soviet troops happened less than 20 years ago. The wounds inflicted by all of these wars are still raw. The country has a great deal of history to work its way through, a great deal of suffering to digest and, most of all, a great deal of mourning to make up for.

But there are already voices -- in the parliament, in Karzai's cabinet and in the remote provinces -- that point to a new rivalry among ethnic groups, groups jockeying for power, influence and the legends of history.

Old warriors with world-famous names, like Dostum and Hekmetyar, are active once again, as old rifts spark anew between the peoples of the country's south and north. Mutual suspicions continue to grow as it becomes clear that the new era is failing to produce successes. Rival clans are already embroiled in their small wars and feuds. Afghanistan remains a combustible country, a potential battlefield where civil war is still an option -- a civil war that some are already waging.

On the day of the attack on Hamid Karzai, Mujahedeen Day, a national holiday in Afghanistan and a day of parades, three men have been lurking for at least 36, probably 72 hours, in a guesthouse less than 500 meters from the Kabul parade ground. Their accomplices have locked them into their room from the outside. A padlock is on the door to create the impression the room is unoccupied. The assassins have stocked up on energy drinks, water and crackers. They urinate into bottles and send short text messages to telephone numbers in Pakistan.

The room on the fourth floor, which offers a clear line of fire at the grandstand where the government of Afghanistan, headed by President Karzai, and the country's top generals and religious leaders, members of parliament and foreign guests, ambassadors, ISAF commanders and UN directors are about to sit down, has

been rented for 45 days. One of the attackers, a Turkmen, claimed to be a carpet merchant with business at the nearby bazaar. The weapons are hidden in rolled-up carpets.

Spies for the Defense Ministry have been scanning the area around the parade ground for weeks, asking residents about suspicious activities and strangers new to the area. The police have gone into every house, inspecting rooms and looking out of windows, including the guesthouse where the would-be assassins are holed up, which they visited one or two days before the attack. But the door to the room was locked from the outside, the owner of the guesthouse tells police. The people aren't home, he says, and he hasn't seen them in a while. Why break down the door, he asks?

A Plot against the President

No one has any idea that a police colonel is part of the plot. The Taliban have a mole in the heart of the country's security apparatus. Perhaps their man is guiding preparations for the parade in the wrong direction, or perhaps he is sending police on the wrong track.

The mole is the one who procures the weapons for the attack. Unable to get sniper rifles, he does manage to bribe his way into buying assault rifles. Corrupt accomplices set the guns aside in an Afghan army training camp, behind the Americans' backs. They even manage to line up a bazooka and a grenade launcher.

The guests begin arriving on the parade ground at 8 a.m. on April 27. McNeill is there, and so is UN Director Chris Alexander. US Ambassador Wood and his British counterpart, Sherard Cowper-Coles, are standing between chairs, chatting. The government of Afghanistan is gathering on the central stands.

At this time, Karzai is standing below the grandstand, in the hatch of a Humvee, waiting for his appearance. At 9 a.m., the Humvee begins traveling at a walking pace along the grandstand, and then it turns toward an honor guard standing at attention in front of the Id Gah Mosque -- a force of 1,000 men, trained by the West to take charge of security for Kabul beginning in August.

At 9:25, Karzai has returned from the honor guard and takes his seat on the grandstand. The attackers wait, less than 500 meters away, keeping a watchful eye on Karzai. They plan to open fire during the national anthem -- for the effect.

At 9:45, the national anthem begins booming from the loudspeakers. "This is the land of Afghanistan, the pride of all Afghans. A land of peace, a land of the sword, a land of courageous sons." A salute is fired, a long series of shots beginning with a single cannon beat, followed by two, three, four and five shots. The assassins get into position and aim their guns.

"This country will shine forever," the hymn continues, as machine gun fire suddenly explodes into the parade. Three members of parliament are hit on the grandstand, 25 meters (82 feet) below Karzai to the right. Grenades explode on the asphalt, killing a child and a policeman in the line of fire.

The people on the parade ground and on the grandstand begin running and jostling, security personnel form rings around their VIPs and lead them away, up along the rows of seats to an area behind the stadium, but there is also shooting there, where a second group of attackers is firing haphazardly at the fleeing dignitaries. The scene has disintegrated into scores of people ducking and waiting, running and cowering, on this national holiday in Afghanistan, a day that ends up making world headlines. On this day, the news from Afghanistan is not good. In fact, on this day the news from Afghanistan is exclusively bad, chaotic and disastrous.

The next day, US Ambassador Wood will say: "The whole thing was over within 120 seconds." This is the sugarcoated version for the Western public. The people in Afghanistan, however, know that in reality the shooting continued for 25 or 30 minutes, and that the attackers used bazookas, machine guns and grenades. Soon there were helicopters in the air and the assassination attempt turned into a battle, with the presidential guard returning fire, eventually killing the three attackers and chasing three of their accomplices through the city.

These are the images of war in downtown Kabul, in the heart of Afghanistan, where half the world has spent the last seven years trying to bring peace to an oppressed country, and where the fighting continues, in Afghanistan's valleys, mountains, cities and deserts, on many fronts hard and soft, day after day.

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan.

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