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Sticks-and-stones diplomacy works in Afghanistan

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It was a day unlike any other I have experienced in Afghanistan and one I won't soon forget.

As our tiny convoy lumbered into a central Kandahar City village, the mid-morning sun drove temperatures above 35 degrees. Dozens of small children swarmed our hefty, olive-coloured LAV III's, jockeying for position to greet the soldiers as they dismounted from their vehicles. As we halted amidst the entrepreneurial chaos of an Afghan market on this Friday morning – the official day of rest in Afghanistan – colourful pashminas, trinkets and other sundries found in a Third World bazaar were randomly laid out for sale. Meanwhile, young Pashtuns jumped up and down blurting-out "Bic," as their fingers madly scribbled the actions of an invisible marker into their palms; they wanted our pens.

Normally, Canadian convoys stop in neighbourhoods like these to meet with the locals, see how they're getting on and to let them know ISAF hasn't forgotten them.

But the Canadians were in this neighbourhood for a different reason.

"Our intent really is to stop the kids from throwing rocks at our vehicles," quipped Lieutenant Dan Hogan, a platoon commander with Canada's Provincial Reconstruction Team. "We regularly drive through these villages during our patrols. And as kids will inevitably be kids, some in this area have taken to throwing rocks at our vehicles; not unlike kids at home throwing snowballs at passing cars: the same thing is happening here. We really want to curb this trend, though, as on a couple of occasions, these rocks have broken mirrors on our vehicles. As such, we're conducting this patrol in an effort to gain positive face-time with the kids and to ask them to stop throwing the rocks."

Ask? Could our soldiers be more quintessentially Canadian than this?

Meanwhile, dozens of boys and girls, uninhibited by any cultural norms and obviously not intimidated by our weapons or body armour, welcomed us into their enclaves. Many cheered with excitement while others shook our hands vigorously. And in the midst of this youthful melee, our patrol commander sought out village elders to engage them in small talk and to pass along our message: Please don't throw stones at us.

Several children, to our surprise, confidently asked us questions with dramatic, lilting tones: "How are you?" and "How old are you?" were the typical catchphrases, while others inquired, "What is your name?" and "Where are you from?"

As they asked their questions, others rushed in, wide-eyed and smiling, and tried to teach us some of their own expressions. In our best Pashto dialects, we gave Salaam aleikum – "peace be with you." Encouraged by our responses, the kids continued to walk with us, teaching snippets of their language along the way.

Their effect was incredible. Their innocence and inquisitiveness couldn't help but move the hardest of our soldiers, whose icy and seemingly impenetrable stares – set in place by months of training and for some, previous combat experience – suddenly broke into broad-brimmed smiles and laughter that only these influential young diplomats could achieve.

One child, who couldn't have been any more than eight-years-old, approached me and with a disarming smile, extended his hand in goodwill. Instinctively, I placed my hand in his, removing mine from my rifle and, for those few seconds, sealing a fleeting bond of friendship with this young Afghan.

My lighthearted companion kept pace with our patrol as we sauntered along the great canal bisecting the city, smiling at us the entire time. As we made our way from village to village, he carried on a conversation with me in Pashto – I couldn't speak a stitch but this didn't seem to matter to him – while cleverly rolling a bicycle tire with a small stick, strutting his stuff it seemed, for our entertainment.

Those kids have given me lifelong memories of an Afghanistan I previously thought was all misery and squalor. The ability of these children to overlook their desperate circumstances and so easily reveal their innocence speaks of their incredible resilience and ability to see the good around them.

This foot patrol was designed to stop children from throwing rocks at our vehicles. But I would argue this patrol achieved much more than this – the often-ungraspable sentiments of friendship, trust and hope.

It is often heard that “tanks, troops and guns cannot win the hearts and minds of ordinary Afghans.” While I do not agree with that statement given my experience here, it was Canada’s soldiers whose hearts and minds were won over by the children of Afghanistan.

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