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Coalition moves on Taliban before election

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DILA, Afghanistan | The Chinook helicopters surged toward a hot landing zone. Another pilot scouting ahead had sighted a band of suspected Taliban fighters in the area, and gunfire was expected.

"There are at least 20 guys down there. It could be a good day," said Lt. Chris Dewey, a plug of tobacco bulging from his lower lip.

Moments later, two Army platoons from Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry charged out into the open, heaving themselves to the ground, rifles forward, as the helicopters pulled away and the dust cloud whipped up by their huge twin rotors settled back on the uncertain terrain.

Coalition forces have begun a disruptive operation in this province before registration for next year's national elections, which are scheduled to take place across the province over the next month. The goal, according to U.S. officers, is that insurgents will no longer be free to maneuver without looking over their shoulders.

"Hopefully, the enemy will be confused by our presence, worried about it enough to carry us through voter registration," said Capt. Jeff Farmer, the field commander of last week's operation.

The operation has taken them to Dila village, a patchwork of crumbling mud buildings in Afghanistan's western Paktika province. The province is a vast and sparsely populated moonscape bereft of roads, economic prospects and the rule of law. Such circumstances favor the Taliban and their allies, who have made inroads deeper into the region from rear bases in Pakistan to attack security forces and critical transport lines.

U.S. forces were last on the ground here more than two years ago, and the district center that once housed Afghan police was abandoned over the summer. Militants now stalk the several hundred Pashtun families that eke out a living off the land.

Since arriving at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Kushamond in late September, Capt. Farmer has been busy consolidating his own foothold in a new battle space he describes as "austere."

Built by U.S. engineers shortly after the 2001 invasion, FOB Kushamond was originally meant to be a staging area for the construction of a road network to integrate the backcountry. But the project never materialized, and the base fell into disrepair.

That's changing. Charlie Company has reinforced the dirt-packed blast walls around the perimeter, constructed wooden barracks with piped heating, and is in the process of boring a well for water, which is currently air-dropped each day by Russian pilots.

These improvements mean more attention can be paid to extending security "outside the wire," where fear of the Taliban is widespread.

During the military operation in Dila, interpreters tasked with monitoring Taliban radio traffic picked up their cryptic talk: "We are watching to see what they do next, be ready," and "Don't worry, I'll give you everything you need."

For two days, the troops of Charlie Company went door-to-door in the village. They followed out-of-date maps on which each home was numbered, checking one off only to find two new ones that were undocumented.

Encounters with the locals were mostly pleasant but vague.

In dozens of conversations, people said the Taliban passed through and took what they wanted. How frequently they did so -- and their current whereabouts -- were impossible to pin down. Some said fighters had come on foot four months back; others just four days before.

The only consensus was that they had all gone to Pakistan for the winter, a line that company members did not buy for a second.

Haji Azrat, a tribal elder with a long, white beard, broke from the script. With the confidence of someone who has lived long enough to speak his mind, he denounced the Taliban in colorful terms the interpreter hesitated to translate.

"When the police were here, we at least had some security, but then they left," he said. "Can you bring them back?"

Lt. Dewey assured him: "This we can do for you."

Late in the day, the lieutenant's platoon uncovered a small weapons cache at a home in a far corner of the village. It contained loose rounds for a PK machine gun and a Russian Dragunov sniper rifle, a rusty handgun, sleeping bag and an old Red Army belt.

Finally, the men thought, a lead that might go somewhere.

A next-door neighbor said the owner had crossed the border and that he was unsure when the man would return. A respected elder later said the man was a former mujahideen who had fought the Soviets in the 1980s. Similar stockpiles were to be found everywhere, he said.

The next morning, a shura, or meeting, was arranged in front of a mosque at the center of the village.

The chief of police from Kushamond, Abdul Ahad, stood before the crowd of about 150 people and introduced himself. He then announced a plan to raise a village police force, though he wondered aloud why able-bodied men seemed to be scarce.

They have gone to Kandahar, Pakistan, and as far away as Iran to find work, came the answer. And anyway, people here are too busy working to survive to think about fighting.

Malik Mohammed Mazir, the local patriarch of the Alikhel tribe, could not hold back his frustration.

"You are wasting your time," he shouted, saying that past attempts to empower local authorities failed.

"Millions of dollars have come into this country, and Kabul doesn't even look at us," he said. "We stood with the government some years ago, but the government sold us to the Taliban."

Asked whether they would vote if registration were carried out, some of the men seated next to him replied, "What for?"

The impasse ended when food and clothing were brought out for distribution. Because supplies were limited, 30 men were selected based on seniority and need to receive sacks of rice and beans doled out by Afghan police. Elbows flew when a box of children's jackets was unpacked.

In the background, the sound of voices again crackled over handheld radios. Taliban lookouts were watching the gathering.

Company officers, who had been informed that a suicide bomber dressed in an Afghan police uniform might try to strike, scanned the surrounding rooftops and elsewhere for a sign.

Word soon got back that two men with radios standing in a field had started running when called after. Some squad members gave chase but the weight of their body armor was too much to keep up. It was the closest brush with insurgents of the entire operation.

"We should have just shot them," one of the soldiers later said.

The radio chatter ceased.

As Charlie Company prepared for the 13-minute flight back to FOB Kushamond, the nervous owner of a compound that had been commandeered as a temporary command post began to protest. The militants were angry with him, he said, in what seemed to be an attempt to haggle for better payment from the officers.

He was given supplies of clothing and food and was finally satisfied by a bonus stash of Army-issue Meals Ready to Eat.

Capt. Farmer quipped that he couldn't be sure they wouldn't wind up feeding the Taliban.

"The bottom line is they have no government, no police," he said. "It's just hard to convince these people we're the side they need to support when they've never even seen the government."