

## THE AFGHAN MISSION

## When the smoke cleared in the Arghandab valley

**What began with the Taliban's brazen attack on Sarpoza prison ends in their rout and a grisly scene of death**

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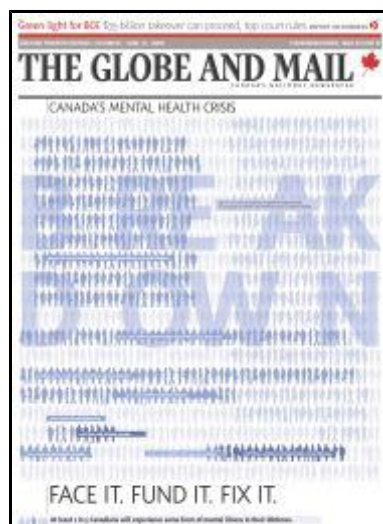
MANARA, AFGHANISTAN -- A stench of death wafted up from piles of bodies, festering in the summer heat of the Arghandab valley. Afghan soldiers held cloths over their faces, pointed to a charred blast site nearby, and described the corpses as the bombed remnants of an invading Taliban force much larger than the Canadian military has estimated.

Kandahar Governor Asadullah Khalid brought a group of local journalists, and one foreign reporter, to the heaped carnage in the village of Manara, about 10 kilometres north of Kandahar city, as part of a broader struggle to define the week of chaos in this province.

After days of responding to emergencies, first to a Taliban raid that freed hundreds of prisoners from a city jail on June 13, and then a short-lived sweep by armed insurgents into a dozen villages north of the city, top officials finally had a moment of relative quiet to reflect on what happened - and to argue over their wildly differing interpretations.

All authorities agree that the Taliban have abandoned Arghandab district in the past two days. But there is major disagreement about the size of the Taliban force that infiltrated this strategic swath of farmland, why they invaded, and what, if anything, they achieved.

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Brigadier-General Denis Thompson, the senior Canadian commander in Kandahar, met yesterday with French, U.S. and Canadian officers in charge of marshalling hundreds of Afghan forces into regular patrols of the district in coming days, as they search for roadside bombs and try to ensure the villages are safe enough for residents to go home.

The Afghan government continues to warn thousands of villagers they should stay away from the north side of the Arghandab River, although NATO issued a statement on Thursday saying the region is secure enough for their return.

"They're gone," Gen. Thompson said, referring to the Taliban, as he waved his hand across a map of the district.

A French officer, sitting on a canvas cot in the shade of a troop carrier, gave the Canadian commander a puzzled look. "But why did they come?" he asked.

"What you have to understand about this district is it's all one tribe, the Alokozai," Gen. Thompson said. "They're mostly pro-government. So this was the Taliban demonstrating to the tribe that they're vulnerable. It was a psychological operation, not a military operation."

Afghan officials have described the incursion differently, saying it was a genuine - if misguided - attempt by the insurgents to threaten the provincial capital. Kandahar is the former seat of government for the Taliban, and the governor said he believes the insurgents overreached in the giddy aftermath of their successful jailbreak.

The heart of the Canadian-Afghan disagreement lies with estimates of insurgent numbers.

Gen. Thompson says no more than 100 to 150 insurgents got into Arghandab, while Mr. Khalid says they had roughly 600.

At a meeting inside Arghandab's fortified district administration buildings, the two leaders exchanged good-natured gibes. Mr. Khalid pointed to an Afghan army officer wearing a floppy sun hat, his face covered in sweat, and said the field commander had just informed him that about 200 Taliban had been killed in the recent fighting.

"Why is NATO saying only a few Taliban were there?" Mr. Khalid said.

Getting no answer, the governor pressed his point. He took a mobile phone from an assistant and showed its screen to the Canadian commander: "Look, we have photos," he said.

The Canadian laughed. "One, two," he said, pointing to the small screen. "That's not 200."

Gen. Thompson tried to steer the conversation toward the need for Afghan police to take over security in the district, saying Kandahar has many other urgent priorities for Canadian troops. But the governor seemed intent on making his point, and within an hour he had summoned several journalists to join a vehicle convoy into the heart of the former battlefield.

A video monitor in the dashboard of Mr. Khalid's sport utility vehicle said the outside temperature was 41 degrees, but inside the cool interior of his luxury vehicle the governor seemed relaxed and philosophical.

Like other Afghan officials, he emphasized the role of foreign fighters in Kandahar's insurgency. The dead in Arghandab included many "Pakoolis," he said, suggesting that sightings of insurgents wearing the flat-topped woolen *pakool* cap indicates a large contingent of Taliban came across the border from Pakistan's frontier region, where that style of headgear is more common among Pashtun tribesmen. Tajiks from northern Afghanistan also wear the same caps, but they play a minor role in the largely Pashtun insurgency.

He also suggested that last week's jailbreak was far too sophisticated to be planned by local insurgents.

"They were very smart, and it was a great victory for the Taliban," Mr. Khalid said. "But I know the Taliban in this province, and they are not so smart."

Rebuilding started yesterday on the Sarpoza prison's destroyed outer wall, a Canadian official said last night, and a temporary structure is expected to be ready within five days. A permanent new gate is planned to upgrade the facility's defences, among other improvements.

Roaring to a halt near the village of Manara, the governor led a parade of visitors on a dusty hike along an irrigation ditch to a place where the trees were darkened with soot and nearby walls had crumbled.

At this spot, Mr. Khalid said, the insurgents had rushed to help a wounded Taliban commander named Mullah Shakoor. The concentration of insurgents was tracked by the foreign troops using aerial reconnaissance, he said, and they were hit by a large bomb.

So many bodies lay jumbled around the blast site, mangled and covered with flies, that it was difficult to count them. Afghan soldiers nearby estimated that perhaps 17 to 19 insurgents had died in the impact of a 225-kilogram bomb.

Mr. Khalid said the commander was among those killed, but an insurgent spokesman said Mr. Shakoor remains alive.

None of the dead insurgents were wearing *pakools* or gave any other sign of being foreigners.

After conferring with Afghan soldiers near the site, Mr. Khalid revised his estimate of the Taliban dead to 105.

The Afghan Defence Ministry put the death toll at 56, and NATO has not released a figure.

Mr. Khalid also pointed to green plastic containers buried at an intersection nearby, one of many explosive booby traps the Taliban installed before leaving. Soldiers had marked the roadside bombs with red spray paint.

Booming noises rang through the valley later in the day, as foreign troops removed such traps by blowing them up.