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INSIDE DEFENCE

A Return Trip to Kandahar Prison

By Scott Taylor

KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN—Last May 2007, at the height of the controversy surrounding the handling of Afghan detainees, I visited the notorious detention centre that was at the centre of the debate.

There had been a number of published accounts alleging serious abuse and torture at the hands of Afghan security officials after prisoners captured by Canadian soldiers were released into the custody of Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS).

Until that point, Canadian reporters had not had access to the actual prison facility and, as Canadian officials were not conducting thorough followup inspections, the allegations of prisoner mistreatment were difficult to disprove.

The NDS was anxious to contain the scandal and to maintain a solid working relationship with the Canadian military in Kandahar. As a result, they authorized *Ottawa Citizen* reporter David Pugliese and myself to inspect their detention centre. We had been given unrestricted access to the Kandahar prison. While the conditions inside the old jail were grim, the same could be said for the filthy, spartan quarters that housed the NDS guards.

Our four-hour inspection of the facility could not, of course, prove or disprove the possibility of prisoner abuse, however, the NDS' eagerness to open their doors to reporters indicated a willingness to comply with any official Canadian oversight of the prisoners.

On my current unembedded trip to Afghanistan I decided to conduct my own followup at the Kandahar detention centre. This time I telephoned prison commandant General Kaium only 90 minutes before my arrival to request a tour and he readily agreed.

During the usual formalities of tea and small talk in Kaium's office, I was introduced to General Wazir Mohammad. It was explained that since last year's controversy, the NDS headquarters in Kabul had assigned Mohammad to monitor the detainees' welfare. It is his job to liaise with Canadian and other NATO officials when they make their now regular inspections. An entirely new prison facility has been constructed adjacent to the old cells that now sit empty.

During my previous visit, I had not only been allowed to film the Afghan detainees in their cells, I was encouraged to do so by the NDS guards. That was not possible during this visit as General Mohammad explained to me that NATO views such images as a violation of the prisoners' privacy.

However, on a guided tour of the new cells, I saw that instead of bare concrete floors, there are now carpets in the hallway and general population areas. Inside the individual cells, each of the 15 inmates had a copy of the Koran, a pillow, blanket, and a bottle of water or pop. The bathroom area was primitive, but new and spotlessly clean. General Mohammad noted that the prisoners all received between two to three hours each day to exercise in the outdoor garden area. This small patch of packed earth is not much of a

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garden, but General Mohammad advised me that improvements will soon be made as the Canadian military has requested that this outdoor area be enhanced.

Of the 15 detainees, three gave their voluntary consent to be interviewed. One by one they were brought to an interrogation room where they explained through an interpreter why they were incarcerated. The first was a 25-year-old police officer named Baqidat. He explained that he and his partner left their checkpoint to go swimming in a nearby canal. As they swam, Taliban insurgents arrived and confiscated their uniforms and weapons. They then executed Baqidat's comrade before fleeing the scene. When a naked Baqidat showed up at the hospital carrying his friend's body, he was arrested for dereliction of duty.

The case of the second prisoner, Abdul Razzaq, was a little more sinister. Razzaq was also a policeman who had been on duty at a checkpoint that was overrun by Taliban. Some 50 insurgent fighters killed all 11 of Razzaq's fellow policemen in their sleep, while he miraculously managed to escape into the village. It was widely suspected that Razzaq had conspired with the Taliban, and he was arrested immediately upon his return to duty.

The third and final detainee was a lanky 19-year-old named Atikula. The border police picked up this young man when they discovered he was bringing into Afghanistan an envelope full of "night letters"—threatening notices Taliban supporters deliver at night to villagers suspected of co-operating with NATO forces. Atikula's defence was that, like 70 per cent of Kandahar residents, he is illiterate and therefore did not know what exactly he was carrying into the country.

Two policemen, who either failed in their duty or deliberately sold out their comrades, and an illiterate teenager are not the backbone of the Taliban, but their tales certainly shed some interesting light on a complex and challenging insurgency.

As I prepared to depart the detention centre, I received word that a NATO offensive had scored a major success against the Taliban just west of Kandahar.

"It's a pity you could not stay longer," says General Kaium. "We will soon have some much more interesting prisoners for you to see."

Scott Taylor is the publisher of Esprit de Corps military magazine and author of several books. Since the 1990s, he has covered conflicts in Iraq and the Balkans. This is his third unembedded trip into Afghanistan.

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