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Kandahar's new police chief getting results

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KANDAHAR, Afghanistan -- More than a month after a suicide bomber blew himself up just steps away from Kandahar's new police chief, remnants of the fatal blast are still hard to miss.

The stairway leading to Matiullah Qati's office is boarded up, the cement walls are pockmarked with holes, and some of the doors sheared off by the explosion have yet to be replaced.

But inside his ornately furnished quarters, the chief seems unfazed by the recent mayhem, insisting that in his four months on the job, he has already slashed crime rates and pushed the Taliban out of the city centre.

The chief credits the turnaround largely to curbing ties between his police officers and the community's bad guys, the kind of corruption that has made the Afghan National Police one of the country's most reviled institutions.

"I began with myself. I promised that I would not take a penny from other people ... I will not break that promise," he told the National Post in a rare interview recently.

"People understand that there has been a big change in town. People have noticed that since I took over the job, there is much improvement. So I am very happy."

The Canadian police team that works closely with the force concurs that the new man is a breath of fresh air, especially compared to his predecessor, Sayed Agha Saqib. Mr. Saqib was fired amid suspicions that he played a part in the spectacular escape in June of hundreds of Taliban from local Sarposha prison.

Matiullah's rosy assessment of the crime scene, however, is not shared by all Kandaharis, with many insisting that security has been getting worse, if anything.

A day after the interview, a senior government official was assassinated on his way to work. A few days later, two dozen bus passengers were seized and then executed by the Taliban in the western district of Maiwand. Two weeks before, Malalai Kakar, the famed Kandahar policewoman whose portrait adorns the headquarters' front entrance, had been shot dead. The Taliban claimed responsibility for all the killings.

"Almost every day there is an assassination or kidnapping," charged Mohammad Naseem, a local businessman, adding that victims often deal with such crimes on their own, so do not add to the official crime rates.

Mr. Naseem, who has moved his own family to Dubai for safety reasons, had associates prepare a list of violent incidents just in the previous week. The reports could not be independently verified, but included the unpublicized killings of a translator working for western employers and an intelligence official on the highway south of Kandahar city, as well as the burning of NATO supply trucks in the city's west end.

Under the previous chief, police were often accused of being in cahoots with the insurgents and other criminals.

The new chief, however, seems different, said RCMP Supt. Joe McAllister, in charge of the Canadian police mentoring program in Kandahar.

"(Matiullah) fully states he didn't buy his job, he didn't bribe anybody to get his job, he earned it on merit," said Supt. McAllister. "I'm very impressed."

Policing the Taliban's volatile heartland, the new chief has already faced several assassination attempts, he said.

Matiullah said some of the insurgent attacks of late are only evidence that he is doing his job, pushing the Taliban from the city centre to the outskirts.

"Kandahar is the nest of Mullah Omar. This is the home of the Taliban," he said, as his young son played nearby. "So when we are making progress, the enemy will try to do more against us."

He said that robberies are down 50% since he took office in late June. There have been no kidnappings, even though the province averaged one a week earlier, he said.

But it seems one breed of criminal has yet to feel the hand of the new chief. The drug lords whose elaborate homes stand out in this otherwise ramshackle city remain largely untouchable. A recent New York Times report cited evidence that Ahmed Wali Karzai, brother to Hamid, the president, might be involved in heroin trafficking, something both Karzais adamantly deny. Matiullah said he has yet to receive a complaint about Mr. Karzai, and so has no reason to act.

"If people come and say 'I have problems with him,' " he said, "we will start an investigation."

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