After the Taliban

By David Pratt

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Afghans rarely make idle threats. So when a belligerent warlord says he will shoot you and burn down the compound in which you are housed, it's wise to take it seriously.

At first glance the setting could not have been more peaceful. A village called Du Abi in remote Baghlan province. A place of dusty streets and a spaghetti western bazaar full of pale children with running sores, the whole place flanked by spectacular snow-capped mountains and cascading rivers.

"Commander Hamid", a local ethnic Hazara and hardman, had decided the time had come to put pressure on Concern Worldwide, the only humanitarian agency working in the district. A commitment from the agency to improve the dirt road where it ran across his land seemingly topped Hamid's demands, but at the heart of his grievance was a complicated political spat with the local governor who had welcomed Concern's work in the area and previously dismissed Hamid from a local government post.

When one of Concern's vehicles full of local staff set out last week on an eight-hour drive to the neighbouring provincial capital of Taloqan, Hamid's henchmen blocked the road. A vicious barrage of threats ensued before the aid workers calmly retreated, triggering a nervous 24 hours, as governor, Concern, and the commander set about trying to defuse the situation before it boiled over into bloodshed.

These are tough times to be an aid worker in Afghanistan. In a little over a week, five staff from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), including three Westerners, were killed in Badghis, another northern province until then considered relatively safe.

Flying out from Kabul airport last week, I met the last MSF workers to leave after their operation was suspended. Following suit in Badghis last Monday were five more aid groups, after a grenade was thrown at the office of an Italian non-government organisation (NGO).

Then on Thursday gunmen killed 11 Chinese road workers after bursting into their compound near the town of Kunduz, in one of the worst attacks on foreigners in Afghanistan since the Taliban's overthrow in 2001. Already this year, 21 aid workers have been killed, compared with 13 for the whole of 2003.

"There is no doubt that the enemy's activities have increased," said Afghanistan security

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chief Dr Abdullah Laghmani. "Because the weather is warm, they can sleep in mountains and deserts at night."

The rapidly deteriorating security situation is directly linked to the approach of landmark elections scheduled for September, which the United States hopes will give legitimacy to Afghanistan's president, Hamid Karzai, but which the Taliban and its allies have vowed to disrupt.

According to Nick Downie, of Afghanistan NGO Security Offices in Kabul, it is estimated that half the country is now off-limits to international aid staff. UN sources say there is substantial evidence that armed militants have been infiltrating northern Afghanistan from neighbouring Pakistan in recent weeks, determined to escalate the violence.

From Kabul to Kandahar and beyond, countless towns, villages and homes are being starved of crucial aid and development work at precisely the time that the country is clambering up the first rungs on the ladder to recovery and needs aid most.

I had returned to Afghanistan to see for myself how far that recovery process had come since the toppling of the Taliban and my last visit in 2002. First impressions were not encouraging. As our UN flight from Pakistan taxied to a halt at Kabul airport, mine clearers kitted out in Kevlar vests and plastic face shields were still scouring the grassy runway apron for mines and booby traps sown by countless warring factions. And this more than two years after the official end of hostilities.

Outside the terminal building itself, two giant billboard-size portraits of Afghanistan's recent heroes seemed to epitomise the potential fates that could befall the fragile stability on which the country is being rebuilt.

On the left, President Karzai, Washington's first choice and great hope for a brighter democratic Afghanistan. On the right, Ahmed Shah Massoud, legendary resistance commander who first fought the Soviet occupiers before being blown to smithereens by al-Qaeda suicide bombers two days before the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington in 2001.

Today Kabul is a strange and contradictory place. Gone are the Taliban's roaming enforcers from the department for the Prevention of Vice and Protection of Virtue. Newly arrived is fortress Kabul, a mushrooming US base. It's almost as if the ancient Bala Hissar castle that sits on the capital's outskirts had been substituted by a new high-tech version in the heart of the city. Instead of mud and stone, the walls are high concrete ramparts padded with protective anti-explosive cladding and razor wire. The watch towers are manned by nervous US soldiers in wraparound Oakleys and carrying M16s.

Cheek by jowl alongside bullet-pocked buildings housing refugees sits a Thai restaurant run by a woman who is said to follow the UN around the world's troublespots providing

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such culinary boltholes for its extensive staff. In the Mustapha Hotel, the Irish bar has reopened. This and other watering holes for ex-pat workers would make ideal targets for the militants who even in the capital have made their presence felt. Not that their getaway would be easy. Crossing Kabul by car can take an age. It's difficult to see how the city can cope with any more congestion before it completely grinds to a halt.

"Thirty per cent of office space is now occupied by international organisations, and property prices and rents have soared to levels comparable with Central London," one aid worker told me.

Not that this means anything to the likes of Mohammed Tahir. I first met him and his family living in the blasted ruins of an old cinema complex as a freezing winter descended on the Dehmazang district of the city. That was two years ago, and the only change since has been the loss of two of his children.

"The agencies have helped and we are grateful for that, but we need our government to help us find a proper house," he told me, surrounded by countless other families facing the same plight in the labyrinth of ruins that is Kabul's own Ground Zero.

At least in the capital some of the physical manifestations of change are there to be seen, but what, I wondered, would it be like in the remotest regions of which Afghanistan is largely made up?

A one-hour flight to the dusty airstrip of Kunduz town was only the start of a marathon journey that highlighted the logistical difficulties facing the organisation of a national election in September.

From Kunduz it's another hour by jeep along the road to Taloqan, 40 miles away. The road snakes across a plain planted with wheat and dotted with small family farms. Mountains rise on all sides, a rumpled yellow, brown and red anatomy of treeless hills climbing towards the ridges where once B-52 bombers dropped their deadly payloads, before flying off leaving snowy white trails in the blue sky.

When I was last here in November 2001, the road was full of Northern Alliance troops pushing the retreating Taliban westwards, leaving bodies and burnt-out tanks in their wake. Those Taliban who had surrendered were dark men in black robes and turbans; dishevelled but undaunted.

Today, the roadside remains heavily mined and in the past fortnight bombs have been detonated under key bridges, fortunately causing little damage.

"Al-Qaeda and the Taliban are responsible," insisted our interpreter. Conspiracy theories are Afghanistan's stock in trade; given credence not least because there have been, historically, a lot of them . Nobody really knows who planted the devices, but al-Qaeda and Taliban resurgents, it seems, are unlikely, given they appear to have their sights set on more

dramatic operations these days.

In rural regions the further you travel out, the fewer the signs of change. Here and there around Taloqan a few petrol stations, supported by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the peace mission sanctioned by the UN, have sprung up, and then there are always the occasional buses with "Donated by the People of Japan" emblazoned on their sides.

Local taxis, by and large, still consist of carriages drawn by horses adorned with red bobbles and jingling bells. The bazaar through which they pass is full of old-fashioned shoemakers and tailors working at hand-operated sewing machines. Stalls still hang with meat covered in flies next to hand-wrought pickaxes, hatchets and oxen ploughs.

It was almost 10 hours of spine-crunching driving across rivers, plains and the 10,000ft Siya Kucha – Black Street Pass – running from Taloqan to Khost a Ferang and the village of Du Abi. Here and there unexploded bombs littered the way and our Landcruiser careered over rutted muddy tracks with mountain drops on either side. Like shiny new coins lying on a deserted beach, we came across schools and bridges built by Concern's workers. This is where the battle for Afghanistan's future and the hearts and minds of its people will really be won or lost.

It is a far cry from the approach of the US military, who have infuriated many agencies by dressing in civilian clothes and driving into rural areas in white vehicles before offering humanitarian aid in return for information on Islamic militants. The implications for real aid workers are terrifyingly obvious.

In Khost a Ferang district over the past few days helicopters from the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) had arrived bringing the advanced guard that would begin the registration process for the election.

The UN says it aims to have most of the nine to 10 million eligible voters registered in time for the country's first-ever direct vote. About one-third of eligible voters have been registered so far and participation by women in rural areas, according to UN sources, is better than initially expected.

But already the problems that they can expect are looming. One local mullah has insisted women cannot have their photograph taken, a prerequisite for the identification card necessary to vote. "These problem will be overcome, we are already helping UNAMA with the registration process," governor Haji Sangi Mohammed told me.

Asked whether he thought insurgents might try to disrupt the ballot, he said that security measures were adequate to prevent any major problem.

"We have mobilised our local police and military, they have fanned out into the mountain communities, and I'm confident they can respond to any attack," he said.

Free and fair elections here would be a great start, but only that. Like so much of Afghanistan, Du Abi and the surrounding region badly need every conceivable kind of help.

At the MSF clinic now run only by doctor Muhaiddim Homaiune after the emergency withdrawal of foreign staff because of security threats, up to 60 patients a day are seen. Most complaints are tuberculosis, pregnancy-related, stomach and respiratory problems.

One-year-old Nazifullah cries weakly as she lies in the tiny makeshift ward suffering from a severe stomach disorder. Like Bebe Helima in the bed opposite, who has problems with her pregnancy, it took a three-hour journey by donkey to get here. Without the clinic they would probably die.

I asked Homaiune what it's like to leave his home in Kabul and come to such a remote place with all the dangers it involves, especially when he is sent by the health ministry and has no choice. "The district doesn't matter, it's all my country," he says.

Finding Afghans with similar selfless attitudes is not difficult – brave men and women prepared to run the risk of being seen as "enemies" by militants who insist they are little more than collaborators .

Critics say Afghanistan's September elections are too soon and are more to do with good public relations for the Bush administration, itself in a presidential election year and keen to be seen steering Afghanistan towards democracy. Perhaps so.

After more than 25 years of war, Afghans are naturally in a hurry to make up for lost time. If the international community has any role, it is in ensuring that Afghanistan's ordinary people are not again badly let down. It must provide those guarantees that vicious opportunist warlords like Commander Hamid and other zealots don't get their way. The coming few months will be crucial.

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