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Qargha Lake siege undercuts U.S.-led narrative that Afghanistan war is on track

By Jon Stephenson
June 22, 2012

The handful of insurgents who launched an assault on a resort on Qargha Lake, west of Kabul, provided yet another deadly reminder Friday that security in Afghanistan is hardly as rosy as portrayed by U.S.-led coalition commanders and Pentagon officials in Washington.

The attack – in which insurgents stormed the peaceful resort frequented by Afghan families, leaving 18 Afghans dead including a police officer and several security guards – capped off a week of bloodshed that has seen a spate of audacious and well-planned attacks. With every episode of fresh violence, the story that the war is going well, or at least according to plan, seems to be unraveling.

It was the latest blow to the spin promoted by the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan: that security here is improving, that Afghan forces are becoming self-sustaining and effective institutions and that a growing number of Taliban are giving up the fight as international forces prepare to withdraw.

Few Afghans believe any of this, and for good reason. More than two dozen Afghans were killed and dozens were wounded Wednesday in two insurgent attacks in eastern Afghanistan, including an attack in Khost province that also killed three coalition soldiers. Another two dozen people were killed in a spate of violence in southern Afghanistan in the two days before that. Four policemen and two civilians were killed Monday in Kapisa province, northeast of Kabul.

On Friday, at least four insurgents stormed the Spozhmai restaurant, which lies between a cool lake and desolate mountains about a half-hour drive from the capital, shooting multiple patrons inside and outside the restaurant. The morning after the siege began, McClatchy reporters at the scene observed Norwegian special forces – trainers for the Crisis Response Unit, Afghan police commandos who supposedly had the lead in the operation – raiding the restaurant where the attackers were holed up, helping to bring an end to the fighting.

After the episode ended, U.S. Marine Gen. John Allen, who commands the International Security Assistance Force, as the coalition is formally known, released a statement praising the Afghan security forces, saying they “arrived quickly to secure the scene and liberate civilian hostages” while ISAF “provided minimal support.”

But the scenes of Norwegians storming the building amid heavy gunfire and explosions suggested that their role was far greater than “minimal.” Later, McClatchy reporters observed the Norwegian forces quietly removing from the scene rocket-launcher tubes that are used by NATO forces, not Afghans, a further sign that the international troops were heavily involved in the operation.

It is not the first time that ISAF has been caught understating the role played by its trainers, who work and often live alongside Afghan forces as part of a major push to improve the quality of Afghanistan’s fledgling security forces. Building an effective and reliable Afghan military is a centerpiece of ISAF’s exit strategy, and while there’s no doubt the quality of Afghan security forces has improved in recent years, many units are plagued by corruption, illiteracy, drug use, and at times questionable levels of competence.

Even elite units, like the police commandos – often praised by ISAF trainers for their courage, and widely regarded as one of the best units in the Afghan security forces – are still significantly below the “tier one” level of western special forces. Their ISAF trainers have had to step in and take the lead in several operations – for example, during last year’s insurgent attack on Kabul’s Intercontinental Hotel.

“It was the New Zealanders who broke the back of the Taliban,” a senior police commander told McClatchy, referring to New Zealand special forces who were mentoring the Afghan commandos at the time. The police commander did not want to be named to protect his job.

A report this week by the respected Afghanistan Analysts Network, an independent research group, followed a U.S. military investigation into a Taliban attack in the southern province of Uruzgan last year that the analysts said revealed “the dismal, virtually negligible role of Afghan security forces. ... Yet the press release from ISAF Public Affairs, published the day after the attack, gave a glutinously adulatory account of their actions.”

The analysts' report said that ISAF spokesmen had "continued to try to spin the story – claiming even recently that the counterattack had been 'Afghan-led,' when in fact, no Afghans were involved in it at all."

Part of the reason behind such comments from ISAF appears to be a genuine desire to bolster the self-esteem of Afghan forces and to promote confidence among Afghans in the soldiers and police that will be tasked with protecting the country when coalition combat troops withdraw by the end of 2014.

Despite ISAF's optimistic assessments, many Afghans are concerned that their security forces will be unable to cope with the challenges of what seems a persistent – and an increasingly virulent – insurgency. Friday's attack was the latest in a series of Taliban assaults that have left mainly civilians as victims. The insurgent group claimed in a statement Friday that foreigners used the hotel for parties and activities banned by Islam, but there appeared to be no foreigners present and Afghan authorities said that the hotel was used primarily by families seeking a weekend break from Kabul.

The gap between coalition claims and the experience of ordinary citizens was evident earlier this week when the outgoing senior ISAF spokesman, Brig. Gen. Carsten Jacobson, told journalists at a news conference in Kabul that "the Taliban's stated spring offensive has so far been a failure."

Jacobson went on to argue that the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program – a multibillion-dollar effort to get insurgents to put down their weapons and provide them with livelihoods – was a success and that "a growing number of Taliban ... have stopped fighting and are permanently returning to their communities."

That remark was greeted with disbelief by Afghan journalists in the room – as was his claim that "the majority of Taliban want peace." One Afghan reporter replied, "You say this, but we Afghans don't feel it."

Stephenson is a McClatchy special correspondent. Special correspondent Ali Safi contributed to this report.