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Police test Afghanistan's fragile ethnic balance

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Patrolling in all-terrain vehicles that whip up clouds of dust, members of Afghanistan's elite Civil Order Police might be viewed as outsiders here in southern Helmand province, an ethnic Pashtun heartland where residents talk wistfully of the Taliban's rule, call NATO troops invaders and refer to Afghan government officials as thieves.

Col. Khalil Rahman and the 441 police under his command in the 3rd Battalion are almost all from northern Afghanistan and belong to minority ethnic groups. Many don't even speak Pashto, the language of most southerners. That could be a recipe for conflict in this majority Pashtun country that descended into a bloody civil war over ethnic lines in the 1990s.

Yet Rahman said he asked for each of his three deployments to Helmand and is planning to settle his bride of two months in the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah.

"This is my country, all of it. I asked to come here," said Rahman, 30, whose clean-shaven face and tightly cropped hair contrasts with most local men, who wear unkempt bushy beards and the traditional turban. Still, when they met in the villages, he embraced them in the traditional hug and Pashtu greeting of "May you not get weary."

As the U.S. and NATO close out their mission in Afghanistan preparing for the final withdrawal of combat troops by the end of 2014, the worry looms large that fresh outbursts of ethnically motivated fighting would send the country into a spiral of chaos and violence that could give al-

Qaida the toehold it needs to re-establish camps to plot attacks on Western targets and train wannabe jihadis.

But an Associated Press reporter and photographer who accompanied the 3rd Battalion for a week did not observe any hostility among local residents to the Civil Order Police, known as ANCOP. Instead, they channeled much of their anger toward government officials, an international community they said reneged on promises of development and the U.S- financed Afghan Local Police.

"No one helps us," said Abdul Qayyum, who was up to his elbows in mud after stepping away from repairing his sun-baked mud home. "The situation was good before the fighting," he said.

Qayyum was referring to the joint NATO, U.S. and Afghan assault on Taliban bases in Marjah, a sprawling region of dozens of small mud villages with a total population of less than 50,000. The idea behind the February 2010 counterinsurgency operation — the largest in Afghanistan since the 2001 U.S.-led invasion — was to kick out the Taliban and make Marjah a model of development and good governance, a shining example of how an area can prosper if it spurns the Taliban and embraces the Afghan government.

It hasn't quite worked out that way, however.

Instead, the Taliban routinely lay mines on the road, and Marjah residents complain bitterly that the development they were promised hasn't materialized and that international money went into the hands of a few corrupt government and tribal leaders.

The residents particularly resent the establishment of the U.S-financed Afghan Local Police, who they say routinely set up random road blocks, charge tolls and threaten to turn over villagers to the Americans as Taliban if they don't pay bribes.

International and Afghan human rights groups have also criticized the Afghan Local Police for various abuses.

Anatol Lieven, chair of international relations at the War Studies Department at the U.K-based King College, said "the local police as a force . . . absent U.S. funding and backup will inevitably turn into drug dealing militias."

Yet Seth Jones, a senior analyst at the U.S.-based Rand Corporation, said the reputation is undeserved.

"The program appears to be effective in undermining Taliban and other insurgent control of parts of the south, east, north, and west ... (and) is contributing to improved security and governance," Jones said. "As with any program, it does have its challenges."

But in Marjah, the criticism was loud and clear.

In a tiny general store in Marjah, Mullah Daoud scoffed when he recalled the 2010 operation, saying they were told prosperity would follow. He said corrupt government officials instead set up shop, along with the local police.

"ANCOP does not bother us. The local police are the problem," said Daoud, an elderly man with a gray beard who was lying on a bright red cushion.

A half-dozen other men — some sitting nearby on the floor, some peering through the curtained door — then launched into a chorus of complaints about the police. One man said the police seized his motorcycle, another said he was forced to pay $20 to get his cotton crop past a checkpoint.

Among the Afghan security forces, the 16,500-strong ANCOP stands out as an exception. They are better educated than the average national policeman or soldier, most of whom can neither read nor write. An ANCOP recruit needs a Grade 9 education, and some among Rahman's battalion are college graduates. They study human rights and behavioral science.

In Helmand, Rahman's men run patrols between Lashkar Gah and Marjah along dirt roads and through mud villages, where they create small outposts and swarm areas where Taliban fighters have been sighted. Occasionally they team up with the Afghan Army and National Police for assaults on Taliban hideouts. They also set up road blocks, stop vehicles and search the occupants — though not women.

Daoud said ANCOP conducts patrols but does not search homes. "They are good. We don't mind them," he said.

He and others in Marjah say the biggest problems with law enforcement in the area are bad training, poor discipline and corruption — not ethnicity.

Some analysts agree that Afghanistan's ethnic divisions have been oversimplified, and even misunderstood.

"There is a tendency among observers to overestimate the animosity between the north and the south, or rather to see it something fixed and static. As if people hate each other just because they are from different areas. It's not like that," said Martine van Bijlert, co-director of Afghanistan Analysts Network, an independent research group based in Afghanistan.

She said animosity arises when one ethnic group forcibly tries to subdue another, not when a group like ANCOP enters an ethnic majority Pashtun area with the intention of working with the population.

"It would probably be quite difficult to rile up people against a contingent that is largely from the north but that behaves well, you would need some pretty strong propaganda and even then it would probably be an uphill struggle," she said. "Many people in the south, and all over the country, are really on the lookout for representatives of the government that behave well. They still hold out the hope that this can supersede factionalism and other dividing lines."