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Rural Afghan town feels caught between U.S. and Taliban

By Pamela Constable

12/7/2012

Every day except Friday, the little midwife school bustled with activity. Students practiced listening for fetal heartbeats and cutting umbilical cords. New mothers and babies sometimes spent the night. It was the only center of its kind in Wardak province, a region of scattered villages surrounded by mountains.

Early Nov. 23, a truck piled with firewood approached the clinic in this small provincial capital 30 miles south of Kabul. Challenged by a policeman, the driver detonated a powerful bomb hidden under his cargo, sending shock waves across the town and shattering almost every window in a five-block radius.

The midwife program was closed for the weekly Muslim holy day, so no one was harmed in the office. But much of it was destroyed, and officials there said it would not reopen. A dozen mud-brick houses nearby were reduced to rubble, and hundreds of people were knocked down or sliced by shards of glass. Panic-stricken residents stumbled or were carried to the town hospital. Four people died, including the bomber, and 160 were treated for injuries.

“The ground shook and everyone started to run,” said Abdul Wali, 25, a hardware shop owner whose gaping glass storefront was still covered with a blanket Monday. “I don’t know who would do such a terrible thing, but we have no security at all. The police beat people, the

Americans raid our villages and still we are not safe. We would be happy if they all left tomorrow.”

Even for people hardened by a decade of war, the massive truck bomb dealt a devastating psychological blow. More than a week after the attack, many shops were empty and not a single woman was to be seen outside the hospital. People in stores and offices were visibly nervous and seething with anger but unsure whether to direct it at the unknown culprits or the authorities, who had failed to protect them.

Taliban spokesmen claimed that they had carried out the bombing to avenge the execution of several Taliban prisoners in Kabul, but police officials had a different theory. They said Afghan security forces had been conducting intensive anti-insurgent raids in the area, and the Taliban wanted to prove that they could assault a high-security district that included police headquarters, the governor’s guesthouse and a joint U.S.-Afghan military command post, as well as the midwife school.

“The enemy stabbed us from behind,” said Gen. Abdul Razzak Qureshi, the deputy provincial police commander, whose office door was blown off its hinges. “We cleared 150 villages this month. We wanted to test our forces to see if they can defeat the Taliban once the American troops leave. We were very successful, but they did this cowardly attack to show they are still here.”

Wardak, a rural province where nomads camp in summer, has increasingly come under Taliban control in the past five years. The town of Maidan Shahr is strategically located on a major highway, and both the national police and the U.S. military have large bases less than a mile away. But most of the populace is from the same Pashtun ethnic group as the Taliban, and many farmers have turned to opium poppy cultivation, making them natural allies of the insurgents.

Taliban attacks have been relatively rare in Wardak, but in early September, twin suicide attacks in the town of Syedabad killed 13 people and wounded 80 when one bomber on foot and another driving a fuel tanker detonated explosives near a U.S. military base.

Although the trappings of security are visible in Maidan Shahr — including U.S. military cameras on posts and a spy balloon that floats over the town — residents complain that the Afghan government’s presence is woefully inadequate. They said the governor and most provincial officials live in Kabul for their own protection and visit Maidan Shahr a few hours a day at most, leaving well before sunset. The governor, through a spokesman in Kabul, declined to be interviewed.

“The problem is not that the Taliban are strong, it’s that the government is weak,” said Ghulam Nabi, an administrator for the Scandinavian charity that operated the midwife school. He said many civilian officials and police officers were ethnic Tajiks from the north, who have a history of conflict with Pashtuns. “If our governor and police chief lived here and had families here, they would make sure we had the peace and security and services we need.”

Residents expressed widespread indignation at the abusive behavior of local police, and half a dozen people separately described the recent beating and drowning of a truck driver at police hands. And although no one openly said they supported the Taliban, many people expressed far stronger concern and frustration about the village raids being carried out by Afghan troops with U.S. backing.

Two nervous officials from a government agency, who had driven from Kabul to assess bomb damage to shops, said they could not find most of the owners.

One of the few open stores was a small but stylishly arranged boutique for women's fashions and shoes. The proprietor, a young man named Taj Mohammed, said he had been sleeping there at night, despite the freezing cold, because he feared being arrested if he returned to his home village.

"We have nowhere to stand. We have trouble with the government, the Americans and the Taliban too," said Mohammed, who had just spent \$400 to replace his picture window. He was clearly terrified by the bombing, which he described as a roaring wind that made the roof collapse on him. But he shook with emotion when he described other powerful forces, including NATO troops, as having replaced his town's normal life with uncertainty, abuse and fear.

"We don't even feel human," he said. "I know we will suffer more when the American forces go, but we are fed up with them too. We don't expect much from the Taliban except beatings, but the Americans are supposed to bring laws and principles. What we have here now is just chaos."