

Afghan roundup Oct 2011-11-07

Suicide bombers ask directions – from police!

by Chris Graham

In the Panjshir Valley in Eastern Afghanistan last month, five suicide bombers called at a local police station to ask directions. "Which way to the Americans?" they asked, and were directed to one of the few remaining US bases in the province, Forward Operating Base Lion. It was 4am on a Saturday morning.

The five assailants rammed a car loaded with explosives into the base's front gate and for half an hour buffeted the base with rocket-propelled grenades. At least two of the attackers were able to breach the walls, running a few feet inside before being cut down by American and Afghan bullets. For the insurgents, the attack was a clear defeat: no Americans were killed or wounded. All five assailants were killed or blew themselves up. (New York Times).

Also last month, the governor of Afghanistan's Paktia province escaped unhurt from a Taliban commando-style attack. Juma Khan Hamdard was in a convoy of vehicles when three suicide bombers began firing at it outside his headquarters in the town of Gardez, the provincial capital of Paktia, near the border with Pakistan. One police officer and a civil servant were killed in the clash before the bombers were gunned down. The insurgents were in a vehicle packed with explosives that went off during the clash outside the governor's compound, adjacent to several other key government buildings. There were no casualties from the blast, but it caused some damage to the buildings. Paktia police chief Abdul Ghafar Safi said the bombers carried assault rifles, a rocket launcher and hand grenades. (Washington Post).

Over 120 militants were killed by Nato troops in Afghanistan during October. In two days, Afghan and Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) eliminated 43 anti-government militants and detained 19 others in separate operations. In a separate 24-hour spell, coalition forces killed 21 insurgents and detained 19 others in different parts of the country.

On October 14, Pakistani intelligence officials said a US drone strike had killed four militants in the country's northwest, the third such attack in less than two days. They also reported that a suspected US drone strike had killed five militants linked to a top Taliban commander in Pakistan's northwest tribal region on October 27. (VOA News).

On the tenth anniversary of the war in Afghanistan, the former top US military commander in the war said the United States and its allies are only "fifty percent of the way" toward achieving their goals. American military commanders have repeatedly sought over the past decade to "put time on the Washington clock," as retired General David Petraeus once put it, by describing the progress their forces made in the counter-insurgency campaign. However, Petraeus' predecessor as the top commander in Afghanistan, retired general Stanley McChrystal, has

sharply broken with that message. He told the US Council on Foreign Relations: "We didn't know enough and we still don't know enough. Most of us, me included, had a very superficial understanding of the situation and history, and we had a frighteningly simplistic view of recent history, the last 50 years." McChrystal resigned his command last year after a Rolling Stone article reported that his staff disparaged the civilian leadership of the war from the White House; a military investigation subsequently cleared him of wrongdoing and questioned the accuracy of the report. (The Envoy Yahoo! News).

According to the Canberra Times, Australia will have spent about \$6billion on the war in Afghanistan by the time their troops leave in 2014. But Afghanistan will need financial and military support for many years after the 2014 deadline for foreign combat troops to return home, and may not be able to balance its budget until the middle of next decade, according to Britain's ambassador in Kabul. William Patey said he was confident the Afghan army was already stronger than the Taliban, but it would need long-term help with training and funds. "I think it's going to take at the earliest 2025 before Afghanistan might be able to balance its budget," he said.

During her recent visit to Pakistan, US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton appeared to soften Washington's stand on a key point of contention between the two countries: whether Islamabad should take military action against Pakistan-based insurgents fighting American troops in Afghanistan, or try to engage them in peace talks. Clinton seemed to acknowledge during her two-day visit that help with a negotiated settlement is perhaps the best the US can hope for from Pakistan. This shift in the US stance could give Washington and Islamabad new room to co-operate on ending the Afghan war. (Associated Press).

The 10-year war in Afghanistan brought an influx of foreign cash, helped boost real estate values. But since US president Barack Obama set in motion a US withdrawal this summer, security concerns have been driving land prices down. With more than three-quarters of the population reliant on agriculture to make their living, land is a measure of wealth and one of the most clear-cut investment options. Property prices have historically risen and fallen with the fortunes of the nation. But after several years of a soaring property market, real estate prices here have plummeted in the last few months. (Christian Science Monitor).

The UN refugee agency has reported that the number of Afghan refugees returning home has dropped substantially this year, with some 60,000 repatriating from overseas in the first ten months compared to more than 100,000 over the same period in 2010. (Xinhua)

The Afghanistan war is hindering the fight against polio and Commonwealth leaders have warned that without total eradication there could be a resurgence of the crippling disease. Polio remains in just four countries, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nigeria - all members of the Commonwealth. Leaders from Britain, Canada, Australia and Nigeria, and US billionaire Bill Gates, have pledged tens of millions of dollars in extra funding to wipe out the disease. "It will be an investment in saving lives," said Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard at a joint news conference with the other leaders on the sidelines of the recent Commonwealth summit.

Global polio infection rates had fallen from a high of 350,000 a year to a current low of 1,000 a

year, said UK prime minister David Cameron. "We are now within sight of the great goal of eradicating polio. But nearly eradicating is just not good enough. Polio is a highly contagious disease," he said. "A single person with polio can infect hundreds of people before it is even been identified. If we fail to eradicate polio completely we run the risk that the disease will spread back to the country in which it has been eradicated." (Reuters).

In Kabul, Afghanistan's first bowling alley offers respite from war. Located just down the street from the capital's glitziest mall, is The Strikers, the capital's newest entertainment venue, a place for family fun in a city largely devoid of options, and a gamble by owner Meena Rahmani. "We can never compare a bowling centre in Afghanistan and one in the West," said Rahmani, "Afghanistan needed a place like this." Building the 12-lane bowling alley, powered by several industrial-sized generators, was a massive undertaking. All the equipment has had to be imported, and the engineers came from China. The entrance to the alley sits behind blast-resistant steel doors guarded by burly men toting AK-47 assault rifles.

Rahmani has gambled \$1 million of her own money - secured from the sale of family land - that the centre will not only help bored Afghans kill a few hours, but also be a place where men, women and families can gather and relax, not burdened by the social, religious and cultural restrictions that govern daily life in the impoverished country. Inside, several dozen Afghans, most of whom learned to bowl abroad, seem to agree. In the month since it opened, The Strikers has become a hit. (Associated Press).