

By BING WEST

Task Force Chosin, Afghanistan

More coalition soldiers have died in July than in any previous month in the nine-year war in Afghanistan. Last week, the soldier who slept on the cot next to me was killed. A rocket-propelled grenade fired from a snow-capped mountain in remote Nuristan Province killed Staff Sgt. Eric Lindstrom, a father of twin baby girls and the best squad leader in the platoon.

Strangely, our military leaders rarely talk about the battles here. They urge shooting less and drinking more cups of tea with village elders. This is the new face of war—counterinsurgency defined as nation-building, an idealistic blend of development aid and John Locke philosophy. Our generals say that the war is "80% non-kinetic."

Although they welcome the largess provided by coalition forces, the village elders with whom our soldiers drink tea are intimidated by an enemy that prowls at night when our forces return to their bases. The Taliban is a highly mobile, amorphous force, with little popular support. But it is very willing to fight. Firefights are infrequent during the harvest seasons for poppy, corn and wheat, indicating that most local guerrillas are poor kids raised in a culture of tribal feuds, brigandage and AK rifles. The enemy leaders, more sinister and gangster-like, slip back and forth across the 1,500-mile border with Pakistan.

While our Special Operations Forces launch raids that disrupt the Taliban, our conventional soldiers carry out the less-adventurous "framework" operations—mainly presence patrols. With 80 pounds on their back, day after day they slog through the heat, dust and mud, waiting for the enemy to initiate contact.

Overall, too few of the enemy are being killed or captured to sap their morale. It's like fighting Apaches in the 19th century. The hidden guerillas shoot from tree lines or mountainsides, making accurate return fire impossible. And we rarely bomb a compound, despite press headlines to the contrary. A week ago, a Marine, a British adviser and I watched a man scurrying back and forth at one end of a long building while we were under fire from the other end. The man was carrying something, but the Marine couldn't decide whether the rules permitted shooting him. No army has ever fought with the restraint of the U.S. and its NATO allies.

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Associated Press

In 2002, American social engineers contrived a democratic model that placed the power of the

purse inside the ministries in Kabul, believing that central control would stifle regional warlords. When the resulting corruption and favoritism deprived the villages and districts of funds, the U.S. military established Provincial Reconstruction Teams armed with millions of quick-spending dollars. The hugely popular PRTs have provided the funding lubricant that enables local government to operate.

On both fronts—development and fighting—the U.S. military has surged forward this summer, just as promised. Given the vast, harsh terrain and the immense open border, instead of 60,000 American soldiers we actually need 100,000—and many more helicopters. Infantrymen wear down after hundreds of grueling patrols. Instead of a 12-month tour, the U.S. Army should rotate its units on a seven-month basis and keep their brigades intact, as do the Marines.

Regardless of these shortcomings, there will be progress over the next year. Gen. David Petraeus, the theater commander, knows how to defeat an insurgency. In the north, we don't have to occupy every remote valley. Tribal rebels who just plain like to fight can be isolated in the harsh mountains to enjoy their privations. In the south, the Marines and the British are cleansing Helmand Province of the toxic mixture of drug smuggling and insurgent dominance.

War is not complicated. You have to separate the guerrilla forces from the population and kill them until they no longer want to continue. Al Qaeda, dominated by Arabs, is finished inside Afghanistan. The Taliban are Afghans, to be dealt with by Afghans. As he did in Iraq, Gen. Petraeus wants to recruit local forces to protect their own villages. That will expand the Afghan forces to 300,000 and stabilize the situation. On patrols, Afghan soldiers spot the enemy 10 times more frequently than do coalition soldiers. Afghan soldiers are brave, hardy, ill-disciplined, individualistic, temperamental and trustworthy.

A year from now, coalition forces should be able to gradually withdraw, replaced by robust support and adviser units embedded in Afghan security forces. We shouldn't make this a NATO war, allowing the Afghans to stand back. We're outsiders, no matter how many schools we build or cups of tea we drink.

Staff Sgt. Eric Lindstrom was quiet the night before he died. His squad was going into the bottom of a "punch bowl" with mountains all around, not a good place to fight.

For things to turn out right for us—to keep faith with Eric—we have to gradually let the Afghans do their own fighting, while supporting them generously. Afghan forces will need \$4 billion a year for another decade, with a like sum for development. The crunch in terms of American support for the war will come a year from now. The danger is that Congress, so generous in supporting our own forces today, may not support the aid needed for progress in Afghanistan tomorrow.

Mr. West, a former assistant secretary of defense and combat Marine, reports regularly from Iraq and Afghanistan.

This opinion piece was first published in the New York Times on 28th July 2009. We hope they don't mind too much that we "lifted" it from them. They publish a lot of good stuff, and this

authentic message from the front in Afghanistan deserves to be read as widely as possible. We asked the UK MoD recently if they'd facilitate such a thing from UK troops on the ground. We got the metaphorical shrug of the shoulders.....