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CIDA puts boots on the ground in perilous Afghan districts

By Bill Graveland, THE CANADIAN PRESS

MOHAMMED BIN RASHID VILLAGE, Afghanistan - Officially, the modest village just off the major highway west of Kandahar city bears the name of its benefactor, Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid, the Ruler of Dubai, who has a penchant for helping the less fortunate.

The locals, however, simply know it as "the handicapped village" - a place built specifically for the countless disabled people for whom life in their own villages consisted largely of begging for their very existence.

On this particular day, Panjwaii district leader Haji Baran was among those visiting the village to attend a shura alongside Brig.-Gen. Denis Thompson, the commander of Task Force Kandahar, and other Canadian officials, including representatives of the Canadian International Development Agency.

The crowd is comprised of the very young and very old, many bearing the unmistakable scars of life in a country ravaged by war: elderly, legless men in wheelchairs of every shape, size and colour, others hobbling on crutches, still more having long since lost their eyesight.

The children are wide-eyed and smiling, watching all the hubbub with anticipation and excitement.

"It's obviously well constructed, and it was purposely built for a handicapped community - but what I don't think they foresaw or built into the plan is any kind of ongoing maintenance," Thompson said of the village.

"I mean, they built the houses and put the people in them, but someone has to look after them, and I think that's the bit they haven't got quite right."

Also on hand for the meeting was Lara Romaniuc, the stabilization officer for the Zhari and Panjwaii districts - essentially the first civilian foot soldier to be deployed by CIDA in this perilous and poverty-stricken region.

Romaniuc and her foreign affairs colleague Andrew Howard will be taking turns stationed at forward operating bases in the volatile regions.

"I want to be able to deliver what they want and what they want are pretty basic things - they want security," Romaniuc said.

While it is security that most people seem to be focusing on, the Canadians - who mentor their Afghan counterparts primarily in terms of military and policing - now find themselves struggling more and more to keep up with the growing list of Afghan demands.

"CIDA's the ones with the resources, right? All of the stuff - roads, ditches, schools, (and) frankly, local governance - they also need to be mentored," Thompson said.

"I'm plugged into the Afghan National Security Forces, but there's a similar bunch of people that worry about electricity and sewage and water, and that table isn't populated by guys in uniform. It's populated by people like Lara."

The list included food for Eid al-Adha, a Muslim holiday coming in early December; warm winter clothing for kids and the elderly; a power generator; hand pumps for the water well; a health clinic; education for the children; and an aid agency to cultivate self-sustaining tools and skills.

"The worst thing you can do is go into a community and raise expectations, so you want to pre-position aid and have things lined up before you go in," said Romaniuc, who worked providing aid in Cambodia, Turkey and the Ukraine before joining CIDA in 2002.

"When we went in, I didn't get a very clear idea of what the numbers are, so how much clothing, how much food do we need to provide?"

Having Romaniuc in the field eases the burden on military personnel, who until recently had been on the front lines when it came to providing assistance.

"They're happy to come here, but they're afraid. They walk in and walk out of that gate with caution, and they're looking left and right to see if anyone is on the other side of the road sizing them up," said Petty Officer Shawn Coates, of the Joint District Co-ordination Centre in Bazar-e Panjwaii.

"If that kid or that woman or man goes back into that village and has a whole pile of stuff, it's obviously from the Canadian Forces establishment - then they could become a target."

There are risks that come with being a civilian out in the field. Although Romaniuc will travel with a Canadian military escort, she often goes unprotected when she sits down for community meetings.

"You get a very different response if you go in with your flak jacket and your entire gear. It's intimidating, and body language speaks volumes. It speaks louder than words, and it's the risk that I'm willing to take," she said softly.

Elissa Golberg, the Representative of Canada in Kandahar, said sending forward civilian representatives has been in the works for the past year and demonstrates what CIDA and Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs are trying to achieve in a co-ordinated approach.

"There are some parts of Zhari-Panjwaii which are more secure than others, and the key then is to take the best advantage of that," Golberg said.

Golberg, who is on par with Thompson in terms of authority here, said she realizes there are risks in having front-line people actually at the front.

"It's dangerous, absolutely. The decisions that I have to make in terms of the analysis and necessity of when to send them - how to send them - I am putting them in a situation where they may be at risk."