

'I See a Positive Trend Line'

Many of the headlines from Afghanistan recently have been negative. But Elissa Golberg, who headed Canadian development efforts in Kandahar for 11 months, remains optimistic. SPIEGEL ONLINE spoke with her about rays of hope and threats to security.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: Canada has played a major role in Afghanistan, not least on the battlefield. Just last Friday, four Canadian soldiers were killed in two separate incidents. Does Canada still believe the mission in Afghanistan can be successful?

Elissa Golberg: Obviously we grieve for our colleagues. But we all believe in the mission, which is helping Afghanistan establish a viable and stable country that can deliver basic services to its population. That is the objective. But it's one that takes time and patience.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: Time and patience, of course, aren't the only variables. There is a persistent insurgency which receives assistance from across the border in Pakistan. How can reconstruction efforts like yours in Kandahar gain the upper hand?

Golberg: The insurgency is different depending on where you are. At the end of the day, the objective has to be that of getting a majority of people to believe in their government. That is what this is about. You have to get people to believe that it is in their interest to side with their government rather than the insurgency. There are clearly border issues as well. Afghanistan and Pakistan are both better off if they have a positive relationship with one another. Canada has been working together with the two countries on a series of practical issues, like the illicit movement of people and goods, for example.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: At what point, though, does the international community throw up its hands and say that this simply isn't working?

Golberg: Let's not forget that it has only been seven years since this country emerged from what was 30 years of consistent destabilization. It is a huge challenge. But the insurgents aren't offering anything to the Kandaharis on a day-to-day basis. The only thing they want is to prevent government services from being delivered to the population and to drive out the international forces.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: President Hamid Karzai himself comes from Kandahar, and his brother Ahmed Wali plays a very strong role there. But what is that role? There have been many claims that he is a major drug trafficker.

Golberg: Well, Ahmed Wali Karzai is the chair of the provincial council in Kandahar, and he is well respected by members of the community. This council is the only elected body in the province, people bring their concerns to it, and the provincial council of Kandahar is probably one of the most functioning provincial councils that exist. Personally, I've never seen anything that ties him to anything other than a desire to deliver services to the province.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: But the rumors persist. Could that not create a legitimacy problem for the government?

Golberg: Look, the provincial council is an elected bodies and there will be opportunities over the coming months for citizens to have their voices heard. The position is up for re-election. That is what this is ultimately all about.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: Afghanistan has been frequently criticized for the situation of women in the country. What was your experience in this regard?

Golberg: It was different for me than for an Afghan woman, but I never experienced any discrimination. But the situation still remains difficult for women, and the south as a whole is more conservative than the rest of the country. We are seeing strides though. Women are starting to participate in enterprise development opportunities. We've been doing a number of small scale business projects using micro-financing -- things like

raising poultry, tailoring and embroidering. Access to healthcare and education is also improving. One focus has been on basic numeracy and literacy and the women who graduate feel very empowered. Now when they go to the market, they know if they are getting ripped off.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: The Taliban is trying to destroy all of these things. What has led to the group's resurgence in recent years?

Golberg: The Taliban is not a monolith. There are different degrees. Some people identify with the Taliban only in order to secure some immediate economic benefits -- because they don't have a job for instance. Some individuals have old grievances that haven't been addressed properly. And then there are others at the farther end of the spectrum who wish to see Afghanistan return to the way that it was in the 1990s. Even those people are motivated by very different things. One of the things we have tried to do in the last 18 months is understand the dynamics in the province in a much more sophisticated way than before.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: What sort of things does that entail?

Golberg: We are focusing on returning business activity to smaller towns. We are trying to rehabilitate waterways to help farmers. It's all about creating economic opportunities for these folks.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: And security, surely?

Golberg: Yes. And security. It is true that police in Afghanistan have not historically had a lot of mentoring and training. But in the 11 months I was in Kandahar, I saw quite an improvement in some areas that underwent focused training. Those officers go out on foot patrols more readily, they do community policing. And there are other aspects where we are making improvements. As police go through training, they also get a bank card so they can receive their salaries directly and not via their superiors. For the cops, this makes a huge difference. Another component is literacy. If you want a functioning police force, they have to be able to run more sophisticated investigations, which means they have to be able to take notes to document the cases. There are certainly still problems, but I see a positive trend line.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: President Barack Obama has talked about increasing the number of troops in Afghanistan but also about negotiating with so-called "moderate Taliban." Does this send the wrong message when you are working so hard to show people the benefits of democracy?

Golberg: We view the increase in US forces as positive. We have said for a long time that there are insufficient numbers of ISAF forces in southern Afghanistan. Our US colleagues invest significantly in reconstruction and development work and if anything I see that as increasing. From my perspective, increased US engagement is going to be a positive.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: Even if that means the Taliban plays a role in Afghan politics?

Golberg: It is up to the Afghans to decide who is in their government and how the Afghan government decides to engage in the political process, including reconciliation.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: Unless it counteracts what ISAF is trying to do. And patience in a number of NATO capitals is wearing thin. Can Afghanistan still be won?

Golberg: If by winning you mean: Can you have a government that is viable, that can protect its borders, protect its people and deliver basic services? Yes. You can certainly always see things from a pessimistic point of view. I have decided to look at the situation with optimism.

Interview conducted by Susanne Koelbl and Charles Hawley

URL:

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,614972,00.html>

RELATED SPIEGEL ONLINE LINKS:

Photo Gallery: Striving for Stability in Kandahar

<http://www.spiegel.de/fotostrecke/fotostrecke-40893.html>

Holbrooke on Afghanistan: The New American Determination (03/23/2009)

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,614893,00.html>

Afghanistan on the Brink: The West Stares into the Abyss (03/20/2009)

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,614555,00.html>

New NATO Commander: Obama Choice Surprises Europeans (03/19/2009)

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,614258,00.html>

© SPIEGEL ONLINE 2009

All Rights Reserved

Reproduction only allowed with the permission of SPIEGELnet GmbH