

### IEDs in Afghanistan

March 13, 2009: Over the last three years, the Taliban have desperately sought a way to deal with the foreign troops that hunt them throughout southern Afghanistan. Their traditional forms of combat (assault rifles, RPGs, rockets) have proved generally useless against the better trained, led and equipped foreign troops, particularly the combat experienced Americans. Thus the Taliban have developed tactics that depend on avoiding contact with foreign troops, and concentrated instead on using IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices, roadside and suicide bombs). In the first two months of this year, two thirds of the 48 foreign troops killed, were victims of IEDs. But the Taliban are still losing 15-20 men for every foreign soldier killed. The Taliban have had to raise the pay of their fighters, to \$300 or more a month, and they are finding fewer takers. Even those paid to place roadside bombs suffer casualties, because the U.S. developed tactics for detecting those placing the bombs. That usually results in the bomb emplacers getting captured or, more likely, killed.

The one major flaw in depending on IEDs is that it's a very expensive way to make war, and doesn't have a significant impact on the combat power of the foreign troops. Last year, less than two percent of foreign troops were killed or wounded in combat. The Taliban suffered a casualty rate more than ten times that. The IEDs are an expensive weapon because only a few percent of them hurt anyone. Last year, 3,276 IEDs were detonated or detected

before they could hurt anyone, and most of those that do go off, kill or wound Afghan civilians.

Getting these bombs made and placed has become a major enterprise for the Taliban and al Qaeda. But there have been some disturbing trends in the IED department. Four years ago, for each IED used in Iraq, one American was killed. By 2007, it took six IEDs to kill one U.S. soldier or marine. The same pattern emerged in Afghanistan, where it takes about six of them to cause one casualty among foreign troops.

The countermeasures to these weapons have been formidable, and this has forced the terrorists to place more and more bombs, at greater expense, and to employ them more effectively. The organizations that provide the money for bomb building, and help with obtaining materials (there's a black market for everything in Afghanistan, everything), are also evolving. They have to, as the management of the IED campaign have been considered prime suspects, and much sought after by U.S. troops and Afghan police. But you don't hear much about this in the media, for the simple reason that American intelligence does not want to let on how much it knows and how close it is getting to the IED kingpins. That's very much a war in the shadows, and one that extends into neighboring countries. A number of the IED gangs have been destroyed, or severely damaged. But while attempts are made to decapitate the IED campaign, work continues at the grassroots level to detect, disable and destroy those that are placed.

Most of the Afghans making and placing these bombs are not doing it for free. They get paid, and the bomb building industry generates several million dollars a year in revenues for Afghan individuals and contractors. For an impoverished Afghan, this is one of the few good employment opportunities available. Moreover, the experience in Iraq led to the creation of many snazzy instructional DVDs and videos for wannabe bomb makers. Excellent graphics, and, unfortunately for Afghans, everything is in Arabic. Some of these have been translated into Afghan languages, but that ran into the problem of illiteracy (which is much higher in Afghanistan, especially among the pro-Taliban tribes.) This has created a new target for Afghan police and foreign troops; the few Afghans who have acquired the skills needed to build the bombs. It's been discovered that every time you kill or capture one of these guys, there is less IED activity in the area, or the bombs are of lower quality, and more prone to failure, or going off while being assembled or placed.

The U.S. is spending over four billion dollars a year to develop new technologies for thwarting roadside bombs. This is revolutionizing warfare, because the electronic devices, sensors and reconnaissance systems developed have many other uses in combat. So while the Taliban IEDs are useless as a war-winning weapon, the countermeasures are very valuable, and the impact of this new tech will be highly visible in any future wars.

The main problem with all this is that you cannot win a war with IEDs. In Vietnam, IEDs were used, but as a minor, secondary weapon. The Vietnamese communists knew they had to drive the Americans out before they could take over. When that effort failed, North Vietnam made peace, and once the American troops left, the communists launched two conventional invasions across the border. The first one, in 1972, failed, but the second one, in 1975, succeeded. The Taliban have no such invasion option. They have to drive the U.S. troops out and then, still outnumbered, take over the government. Many Taliban believe they can do it, with the help of a media campaign that convinces the world that the elected government of Afghanistan, and their foreign allies, are the bad guys. This is all absurd, but the Taliban are spending several hundred thousand dollars each month to build and place IEDs, just to inflict casualties on foreign troops, in an attempt to achieve their impossible dream.

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