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Canadians hope they've cracked one corner of Panjwaii's Taliban triangle

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By Murray Brewster, The Canadian Press

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan - A recent exchange between Canadian troops and local elders in the run-down office of a school principal could prove to be a watershed moment in the bloody, three-year-old battle for Panjwaii - or just another case of empty Afghan promises.

Late last week, 12 Afghan village elders unexpectedly filed in to the airless, white-washed concrete room at the Shamsuddin Kakaarh Boys School for a shura, or meeting, with Haji Baran, the Panjwaii district leader.

Half sat cross-legged on the floor; the others plopped themselves on wooden benches. One by one, their coarse voices echoed off the high ceiling between cups of Chai tea as they aired a long list of grievances, many aimed directly at Canadian troops.

The portly district chief listened intently as the elders from the village of Salavat, a dust-choked community in the heart of Taliban territory southwest of Kandahar, complained about Canadian armoured vehicles driving through their fields and destroying crops.

"You want us to grow wheat instead of poppies, yet you destroy our fields," one of them said, his angry tirade translated into English by an interpreter.

Coalition forces wouldn't have to do that if the roads were safe, countered Maj. Steve Nolan, the Panjwaii commander of the Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team, which works to train Afghan National Army soldiers.

What Nolan heard next made him sit bolt upright.

"If you call ahead of time, we will guarantee you safe passage," the unidentified elder answered.

It was the opening Nolan had spent more than six months waiting for. He couldn't believe his luck.

"Tell us where the insurgents are and tell us where they hide their weapons," he said forcefully. "That will help us trust you."

With the sun streaming across their faces from two iron-barred windows, the elders remained silent for what seemed like a long time. One of them stroked his chest-length, snow-white beard and assessed the Canadians with a critical, almost hateful eye.

Finally, the elder who had led the discussion broke the silence: the Afghan army and members of the NATO coalition - the International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF - would be invited to their village to provide security.

"This is a huge victory," Nolan said afterwards.

"To have the (leaders) of Salavat come to us, sit in the school principal's office and tell us that they want ISAF to come in for security and for development - it's a sea change of attitude in the area."

Since the battle group first arrived in February 2006, the Panjwaii district has been soaked with Canadian blood. Its sun-baked farmlands and rippled grape fields comprise the Taliban heartland where Mullah Omar found the first converts to his firebrand interpretation of Islam.

Salavat is one corner of what Canadian troops in Panjwaii have come to call the Taliban triangle - an area of fierce resistance southwest of Kandahar where combat operations to root out insurgents have taken place at least three times in the last year.

The other corners of the triangle are Zalakhan and Nakhonay, a well-known logistical hub and staging point for Taliban fighters coming into the region from Pakistan.

From Nolan's point of view, as goes Salavat, so goes the rest of the Taliban triangle and perhaps the rest of Panjwaii.

"I see it as an opportunity to (reach) the turning point - all capital letters, the turning point - of Panjwaii," he enthused.

"If we can do this town correctly, other villages will want to be like Salavat."

But like everything else in the shadowy nature of this war, the victory in the desert may turn out to be a mirage. Over the last week, The Canadian Press has contacted several village elders who denied they are ready to invite Afghan troops to their community.

Haji Baran misrepresented both them and the situation, they said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Nolan said he suspects the Taliban will fight to keep those villages, which are perched near the infamous red desert known as the Registan, where supplies and weapons are trucked in from Pakistan.

Why would Salavat be willing to surrender now? Nolan said he believes it may have something to do with the coming buildup of U.S. troops, a sign that NATO is not going away.

It may also be rooted in the competitive nature of the Afghans, who might be eyeing the growing number of shops in places like Kandahar city and Bazaar-e-Panjwaii multiplying.

Through countless engagements and bitter campaigns, Canadians first established a foothold in the market centre of Bazaar-e-Panjwaii at the foot of the soaring volcanic peak Ma'sum Ghar.

Since 2006, it has been a war of attrition as Canadian forces moved from one village to another, trying to convince wary locals to accept the presence of security forces and take advantage of development aid.

Some villages say yes; others, like those in the Taliban triangle, want nothing to do with the foreign troops or the Afghan government of President Hamid Karzai.

Unlike a traditional military campaign, where soldiers battle for strategic objectives like hills and villages, this war is as much about persuasion as it is about firepower. In conventional warfare terms, Nolan said, he and his team found themselves standing atop an important hill.

"We need to move quickly," said the career infantry officer with the 1st Battalion Royal Canadian Regiment, who just happened to be filling the role of lead mentor.

"We need to have an Afghan-led security force work with these (leaders). We cannot go in there and dictate terms. We need to go in; earn their trust. They've already given us an invitation and now we need to earn their trust and work with them."

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