

Night Raids Threaten Kandahar Operation

By [James Gundun](#)

Global Research, May 27, 2010

27 May 2010

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN](#)

They weren't lying when they said D-Day would come and go in Kandahar. US and Afghan troops "[swarmed](#)" [Kokaran](#), a neighborhood on the provincial capital's western outskirts, with little fanfare last Saturday. But like Marjah, US officials were determined to impress upon their audience the coordination between US and Afghan troops, along with the benefits they bring.

"No American soldiers entered homes," The Los Angeles Times reported. "Afghan female police officers, their faces covered by scarves, searched compounds. Male police questioned residents, confiscating guns from several men who failed to produce permits."

The Taliban, like in Marjah, also put up stiff but infrequent resistance as they melted away.

"The key to making it stick is the governance portion, showing the locals that what they saw today is here to stay," said Army Capt. Michael Thurman, commander of the 293rd Military Police Company, who led the ground operation along with an Afghan police chief. "It's a long process, and today was only the start."

Or perhaps the key is realizing Afghans in Kandahar don't want "today" to be like the rest of summer and throughout 2011.

To "show the locals" a shura was scheduled on Monday to set the table for future operations and development projects. One Canadian civil affairs officer said a "development team" would ask village elders of their needs "so that we don't dictate to them what they get."

Come Monday [The Los Angeles Times reported](#), "It was supposed to be a meeting about governance and development – two of the three pillars of the U.S. counterinsurgency effort in Kandahar province this summer. Instead, the shura, or assembly of local leaders, at a police station Monday turned into a gripe session about the third pillar: security. The elders complained bitterly about a U.S. military raid in their neighborhood, Kokaran, the night before, and the Saturday sweep."

"It's not good, these big operations. They worry the people," Haji Fadi Mohammed told US officials "as other elders murmured in agreement."

US officials responded by defending the sweep and night raid, saying protocol is always followed and shots are rarely fired. True or not, they completely miss – or ignore – the reality that those few times chaos prevails outweigh many successful missions. In a public relations battle America cannot afford a single story like the following.

And yet there are too many nights [like May 14th, 2010](#).

Early morning had fallen on Surkhrod, a small village in the eastern Nangarhar province, and as well as a storm. US Special Forces and an Afghan detachment swarmed on a complex, blaring through bullhorns to exit the building with their hands up – “a practice they say is always adhered to.”

“It’s literally a script,” said one US official who claims they were met with a “hail of gunfire” from inside the compound.

A search, according to the US version, yielded light arms typically found in a rural household, but also, “radios of a type used by insurgents, ammunition vests, a military uniform and – most damning of all, in their eyes – a mortar sight, a sophisticated aiming device used only for military purposes.”

Eight Taliban lay dead when the fog of battle lifted, including a commander that US Special Forces said they tracked for three days. NATO issued a press release within hours claiming eight “terrorists” had been killed; the Afghan Defense Ministry followed suite. Is Afghanistan ever so neat though?

“There were no Talibs here – none,” Rafiuddin Kushkaki, the owner of the sun-yellowed wheat fields ringing the rural compound, said as he held back tears. “Someone tricked the Americans. They made a mistake.”

Perhaps it was the Taliban, or a rival tribe. Maybe an honest mistake – or carelessness. No matter what America takes the blame, that is the price of counterinsurgency. But the visceral nature of these cases is something in itself. Accounts by villagers, including Kushkaki and members of his family, claim gunfire erupted without warning around 1 AM. Most people were asleep inside the courtyard.

“My brother ran out to see what was happening; he was killed right away,” explains Kushkaki. “My son ran out too and was shot as well. I carried him inside in my arms, but he bled to death, here on this carpet.”

Not exactly eight dead Taliban.

It’s possible that US troops did call out first. Those villagers awake said they couldn’t hear anything besides the storm, a factor that would hinder waking the sleeping. US forces may have entered from the back or top only to be greeted by several armed young males. The “hail of of gunfire” could have been confused first shots inside the courtyard, although this scenario doesn’t soothe the mind.

At worst the night raid unraveled into a catastrophe. Mistaken identity murders are more the work of Mexican cartels, not US soldiers. Simply storming the wrong house and acting so reckless descends into the unjustifiable. Hesamuddin Kushkak, an uncle to one of the boys, missed the funerals when he was detained for interrogation by coalition forces. He said the fact that he was released three days later is proof US forces made a mistake.

“They asked me over and over again, ‘Where did you hide the rockets? I told them: ‘Go ahead, search the compound.’ “The military said the rocket cache the commander was suspected of procuring was never found. I told them everything I knew, and now I want to know something from them. I want to know who gave misinformation to the Americans. I want to know why my nephew is dead. We want to know why this happened to us.”

What of the most incriminating evidence, the mortar sight? Family members claim it was planted by US troops after realizing their mistake. Ruling this option out would be naive given how quickly NATO released its statement. The cover-up appears to have begun immediately.

And US commanders wonder why Kandaharis obsessively fear night-raids.

The Los Angeles Times manages to grab two senior US special-ops officials who claim 1,000 night raids were carried out over last year, even as McChrystal publicly ordered to limit them. They defended the raids, like NATO commanders at the Kokaran shura, for saving hundreds of lives, claiming 80% of the raids end without shots fired and less than 2% result in civilian casualties.

But that 20% and 2% might as well count for 100% in Kandahar, and the real percentages are certainly higher to begin with. U.S. officials acknowledged the 29 civilian deaths over the last year are “by their count.” Rafiuddin Kushkaki’s eight family members won’t. The White House and Pentagon have taken to praising the Afghan people’s intelligence – they can’t be stupid all of a sudden.

The Pentagon said it would limit the raids but over 1,000 say otherwise. NATO claims they don’t kill when they do and cover-up when they can. A pattern has developed. As President Barack Obama’s surge already begins to sour, an individual raid becomes a microcosm of the general US strategy: kind words, more force, errors, cover-up, repeat.

The challenge in Afghanistan remains Afghan President Hamid Karzai and his half-brother Wali, who US commanders helplessly left in power, more than the Taliban. Somehow, someday America must discover a remedy to the roots of discord. Opposition leader Abdullah Abdullah recently said Kandahar has a chance of stabilizing under government control, but did a poor job explaining why.

“They rank corruption and bad government as the problem No. 1, even before Taliban and al-Qaida,” [he told NPR](#) while in Washington D.C, his own doubts of Karzai aside. “That’s in the eyes of the people in Kandahar. So, the government of Afghanistan is not looking at it from that angle. That makes it problematic.”

The Los Angeles Times’ headline labeled US officials “satisfied,” Afghans “outraged” by the raid in Surkhrod. Not a recipe for stability in Kandahar or Afghanistan.

James Gundun is a political scientist and counterinsurgency analyst based in Washington D.C. Contact him in The Trench, a realist foreign policy blog, at www.hadalzone.blogspot.com.

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