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## District Governor gives guidance on security to Kandahar villagers

March 11, 2011

By **Sgt. Benjamin Watson, Special Operations Task Force Aca, I" South**



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KANDAHAR PROVINCE, Afghanistan, March 8, 2011 -- When Abdullah woke Sunday morning, he knew he had a tough walk ahead of him to the old school nearby. He grabbed his best clothes, some bread to eat, and his last and most necessary item: crutches.

"I cannot walk to the district center," said the 31-year-old Afghan farmer.

Not only is the district center many miles away, but Abdullah can't walk there because last year he lost a leg after stepping on an improvised explosive device while farming near his home in southern Afghanistan.

"But I am able and happy to walk [the short distance to the old school], because the governor will be there," he said.

"There" for Abdullah refers to a former school in one of the rural villages in Panjwai district of Kandahar province, a district in which Abdullah and the Panjwai district Governor, Haji Faizluddin Agha, grew up.

Abdullah was willing to walk to the old school to see the district governor because a shura would take place, one which would see Agha speak on ways to provide security for area farmers.

"I'm here to help those who need to reckon with the government," Agha said after he arrived at the school. "If you are

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afraid to come to me, I will come to you. This is your Afghanistan. You should be free to travel."

Agha, a stocky and bearded man with a stern, thundering voice, is no stranger to the job of a district governor. Nor is he unfamiliar with the security dynamics of Panjwai.

He has been the governor of two other districts already, including Kandahar's eastern Spin Boldak district. He also fought the Soviet forces when he was a young man living in Panjwai.

Agha was born just a few kilometers away from where the shura took place March 6, a school the Taliban closed and used as a staging area during their reign in southern Afghanistan. The school is not far from where insurgents removed two contractors from their trucks and killed them, less than two weeks ago.

That's the kind of violence Panjwai citizens have known and lived with for years, Agha said. But it doesn't scare him. Agha is hoping his fearless attitude will inspire Panjwai citizens.

"It is risky for any government official to visit the villages like this," he explained to the elders during Sunday's shura. "If the Taliban want to bomb this shura, if they want to send a suicide attacker here, all they will be doing is killing innocent people."

Abdullah sat beside his crutches on the shura rug's edge, listening attentively.

"You are losing the members of your family to IEDs. If it's not your immediate family, then it's your village brothers," Agha said. "You - elders, young men - all have to protect Panjwai. It starts here. We must prevent the death of innocent people."

Most older men in the district knew that Agha fought bravely as a member of the mujahedeen in the 1980s. But not everyone knew one of the more recent reasons why Agha takes the death of innocent Afghans so seriously.

Nearly two years ago, Agha received a call on his mobile phone. The call was from his son. However, his son was not alone when he was forced to place the call.

"Insurgents kidnapped him," Agha said of the terrible episode. "They made him call and they killed him as he spoke to me ... so I am not a man to have any sympathy for the Taliban."

"He is an emotional leader," said Samat, a 22-year-old Panjwai resident who works with Agha at the district center. "And the people know him and they respect his reputation. It is better for the people now that he governs Panjwai because that is where he is from."

Panjwai's remote and rural villages are the most important lands in Kandahar right now, Agha said.

"Those are places where truck drivers are shot, where insurgents move into people's homes in the night," he explained to the elders. "Those places cannot be immediately protected by [Afghan National Security Forces] or the Coalition, because the Taliban live by the law of the jungle, and the law of the jungle burns good trees and bad."

Sympathy toward insurgents, he told them, spreads this fire. Next, development slows and then no one feels safe enough to farm their fields for food.

This has been a problem, as food is always scarce and even worse if it isn't safe to go in the fields, elders have said, telling this to U.S. Special Forces Soldiers from Special Operations Task Force - South during recent patrols.

"Our families are very large and trying to feed them all is sometimes a problem when we know there are bombs out there," said Ghani, a Panjwai elder.

The concept of having security at the food source, the farms, is one of the first places to start when helping rural villagers like those in Panjwai, explained a U.S. State Department official working in Kandahar.

"It is fundamentally important for villagers to be able to think they can go to their fields for food," she said. "When villagers are stressed about the basics, it's hard to get them into a meeting. So the fact that there were nearly 50 elders from one area alone at the shura was a positive sign for generating a sense of community in Panjwai today."

"They're not afraid to be seen with the governor, and they're fed up with insurgents not letting them farm their own fields for food," she said.

"I know what's going on in these villages," Agha told the men at the shura. "But I tell you that if we are to have paved roads that connect villages so your stores get business and you make more money selling your crops, your villages must be secure. You must turn away the insurgents when they come near."

"Insecurity is their gift to you. Of what use has it been to you?" he asked the elders.

Without the elders' guidance, Kandahar's young generations will live "lives of poverty and violence," Agha said.

"As an elder, you must do good things to make people proud," he told those in attendance.

The elders stirred quietly at the governor's words, and Agha went on, closing out the shura with a final thought.

"I'm here to do as you say for the government of Afghanistan, but it is the public, it is you, who must help too. Now is

when we must act for Afghanistan and not regret the day when we had the chance but did nothing."

Before leaving for the short walk home, Abdullah took up his crutches and said, "I am very hopeful with Haji Faizluddin. He does not like the Taliban and he does not like those who have sympathies with the Taliban. We all want improved security, but the elders must decide. I am hopeful, [and] that is all I can say."

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