

100 Days of War

Grand Rapids Press Coverage of the US Occupation of Afghanistan

May 26 – September 2, 2009

**A Report by the Grand Rapids
Institute for Information Democracy
(GRIID)**

Methodology

From May 26th through September 2nd GRIID monitored the *Grand Rapids Press* for stories related to US policy/involvement in Afghanistan. Since the US administration refers to the current military campaign in Afghanistan as involving Pakistan, we also monitored the *Press* for stories on Pakistan.

We tracked the number of stories, media source of the story, sources cited in the story and even included the original full length stories in the collection of articles, since the *Press* version often omitted parts of the original article. The portions of the story that the *Press* omitted are in bold.

In addition to the raw data, we also looked at how the stories were framed, made some comparisons to independent reporting and provide information on aspects of the US occupation of Afghanistan and Afghani politics that were not included in the *Press* during the 100 day study.

We included a few stories that dealt more with Pakistan, because these stories were related to what the Pentagon is now calling the Af-Pak War. All of the stories related to the Af-Pak war that appeared in the *Grand Rapids Press* during the 100-day study period are included at the end of this study. The texts of these stories that are bold are parts of original story that were omitted from the *Press* version of the story.

News Sources

There were a total of 24 stories we documented in the *Grand Rapids Press* related to the Af-Pak war during the 100-day study period. The *Press* relied on the *Associated Press* the most, with 12 AP stories used. There were also 4 stories from the *New York Times*, 1 from the *Washington Post* and 1 from the *Los Angeles Times*. The *Press* also published 6 stories that were written by their reporters.

Framing and Sources Used

A working definition of framing that we use is from media scholar Robert Entman who states that framing is, "*the highlighting of some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation and/or solution.*" Our observation of the stories that were published on the Af-Pak war was that they were framed in such a way as to accept the US government premise for the US military mission in Afghanistan. In other words, there was never any question as to the motive or intent of the US occupation of Afghanistan.

It is evident that the reporting did not question the US military operation in the Af-Pak when one looks at the sources used by reporters. For the stories that dealt with what was happening with the military campaign in Afghanistan the reporters relied

primarily on US military sources. For all 24 stories we documented there were a total of 45 separate sources used. Of those 45 sources, sixteen were US military personnel. If you add US diplomats, military contractors, Defense Department spokespersons, NATO and Pakistani military working with the US they account for another seven sources. On top of that there were 3 family members of a US soldier who was killed in Afghanistan used as sources and 8 community members who were also cited. This means that the total number of sources used that are supporting the position of the US military campaign are 34.

The Afghani/Pakistani voices in the stories were the Afghan President, one member of the Afghan Parliament, 3 opium farmers, a kidnapped Pakistani businessman, a Pakistani truck driver, 1 Afghan civilian, and 1 Taliban official. This means that of the 45 sources used only 9 were Afghani or Pakistani, with the most frequently cited being opium farmers.

The only other sources used were a spokesperson from the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) (a conservative think tank) and a Christian Mission worker who spoke in Grand Rapids. Therefore, the only source used in the entire 100-day study period that did not outwardly support the US military occupation of Afghanistan was a Taliban spokesperson.

Analysis

The bulk of the news stories in the 100-day study period dealt with either the strategic aspect of the US occupation such as a 6/1 *AP* story that looked at how the US was tracking Taliban insurgents or a 6/14 *New York Times* article that dealt with the US training of Afghani soldiers & police. Within these stories the point of view presented is always that of the US.

Other stories that dealt with what was happening on the ground in the Af-Pak war were stories like a 5/31 *New York Times* article that dealt with corruption in Afghanistan, a 6/7 *AP* story on the kidnapping of a businessmen, a 6/21 *AP* story entitled “Extortion, ‘charities’ fund terrorists,” and a 7/12 [Washington Post](#) story that blames “historical conflicts” between Afghanis and Pakistanis that prevents them from being good allies with the US in fighting the war.

In addition, there were two stories (7/26 & 8/16) on Taliban suicide attacks, an 8/9 story on the death of a Taliban commander, an 8/23 *Los Angeles Times* article on the use of private gunmen used in Afghanistan, and two stories on opium production in Afghanistan (August 9 & August 16). The August 9 story looks at the hardships the opium production ban has had on Afghani farmers and the August 16 story looks at the levels of heroin addiction in that country. In neither of these stories is there any discussion of the increase in opium production in Afghanistan since the 2001 US occupation, nor the reluctance of US military leaders to go after some of the larger drug traffickers, [since they have been allies in fighting the Taliban](#). With all of the stories that deal with the Afghan side of the equation being negative, it would be

easy for readers of the *Press* to come to the conclusion that the US military mission in Afghanistan is necessary.

Lastly, there were numerous stories on US troop deaths in Afghanistan. A July 21st story headlined "[July deadliest month for US in Afghanistan](#)," was typical in how these stories were reported. The article provided some statistics and only sourced US and NATO military personnel who continued to reflect the necessity of the current US/NATO military campaign in Afghanistan.

This attitude was reflected in 5 stories that the *Grand Rapids Press* ran between August 18 and August 26. Three of these stories were on the front page, with headlines like "A Fallen Hero Returns Home." It is understandable that the *Press* would report on a local soldier who was killed in Afghanistan, but we question the way the stories were framed, since readers were expected to treat the US soldier as a hero. Readers can make up their own minds about what to think of the deaths of US troops, but the *Press* should avoid making a value judgment about those deaths.

In all the articles, whether local or national, that focused on troops deaths, none of them mentioned Afghani civilian deaths as a result of the war, even though the most [conservative estimates put civilian deaths between 8 – 30,000](#).

The only other category of stories we documented in our 100-day study period were stories that originated in Washington and focused on the policy aspects of the US Af-Pak war. There was a 5/31 story about US government accounting for funds used for reconstruction in Afghanistan. The story was somewhat critical of how the US money was being used, but much of the detailed criticism was omitted from the *Press* version of the *Associated Press* article.

There was an additional AP story based on a government report on war spending in Iraq and Afghanistan. The June 8th story, also critical of how funds were being used, was headlined "*Lax oversight found in wartime spending*." A bipartisan group called the Wartime Contracting Commission conducted the [report](#) cited in the article. In addition to citing the report itself, the only other source used in the story was a representative of the private contractor KBR. There are no [independent sources](#) cited in this story.

Another story coming out of Washington during our study was a 6/17 *Associated Press* article that focused on a Senate decision on funding for war in Afghanistan & Iraq. At one point the article states, "*Democratic leaders pushing the bill on behalf of the Obama administration had to overcome an unusual alliance. Anti-war Democrats opposed continued war spending and Republicans condemned \$5 billion in the measure to secure a \$108 billion U.S. line of credit to the International Monetary Fund for loans to poor countries.*" This is an inaccurate statement, since there was no alliance between anti-war Democrats and the Republicans who voted against it. The Democrats who voted against the bill did so because they were opposed to the continual funding of the US occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan, but most

Republicans voted against it for very different reasons, as was noted by independent journalist [Jeremy Scahill](#).

The last story that dealt with Afghan war policy during the 100-day study was an August 24th *New York Times* article on US troop levels. The article quotes Admiral Mullen who was on *CNN* this past weekend and referred to the situation in Afghanistan. "I think it is serious and it is deteriorating. The Taliban insurgency has gotten better, more sophisticated, in their tactics."

Nowhere in the story are there other perspectives or any attempt by the *Times* reporter to verify the claims made by US military leaders. The *Press* version of the story does mention that recently polling shows more Americans are becoming dissatisfied with the US military occupation of Afghanistan, but the story omits any credible critique of the US campaign either from [US sources](#) or [Afghani sources](#).

Stories Not Reported

There was numerous aspect of the US Af-Pak war that was not included in the *Grand Rapids Press* during our 100-day study period. Probably the most glaring omission was the Afghan Presidential election that took place in August. There was mention of the elections in an [August 17 AP article](#), but the story focus was a suicide bombing.

One of the few Afghani female members of Parliament Malalai Joy, [wrote an interesting piece](#) on Afghan President Karzai's political alliances leading up to the election, and Gareth Porter wrote about the [massive voter fraud](#) instigated by Karzai, a fact that was [confirmed by CNN International and Al Jazeera](#). Independent reporter [Jeremy Scahill also reported](#) that a close friend and advisor to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, James Carville, was involved as an advisor to one of the presidential candidates in Afghanistan.

Another aspect of the Af-Pak war that was omitted from the *GR Press* during the study period was the increased use of US military drones in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Kathy Kelly, with [Voices for Creative Non-Violence](#), who spoke in Grand Rapids in June of 2009, spent time in Pakistan refugee camps interviewing people who were displaced by the bombing from the US drones. Kelly's visit was not reported on by any of the commercial media in West Michigan, although she did do an [interview with GRIID](#) while in town.

One last story that was omitted from the *Grand Rapids Press* coverage was the fact that private military contractors now outnumber US troops in Afghanistan. According to a [Wall Street Journal story](#) in late August, private military contractors now number 74,000 in Afghanistan, about 6,000 more than the current US troops levels. Considering the local connection to military contracting with Holland native and Blackwater CEO Erik Prince, the *Press* could have chosen to run that *WSJ* article, especially since Michigan Senator Levin is cited in the story.

Articles

May 31 New York Times A3

Pakistan claims key win over Taliban

Pakistan's military said Saturday that it had taken full control of Mingora, the most populous city in the [Swat Valley](#), scoring a significant victory against [Taliban](#) forces three weeks after the start of an offensive in the area.

Maj. Gen. Athar Abbas, a military spokesman, said at a news conference that the army was able to flush out militants, in part with the help of locals who showed soldiers Taliban hiding places in hotels and other buildings. The military estimates it has killed more than 1,000 militants since [the campaign began on May 8](#).

Mingora, 100 miles northwest of Islamabad, the capital, is the most important city in Swat, a resort area that was overrun by the Taliban. The campaign is seen as a test of Pakistan's resolve to fight its growing insurgency, which has spread substantially in the past two years, and which the United States says is compromising efforts to quell a similar insurgency in neighboring Afghanistan.

General Abbas announced the killing of two militant commanders, Abu Syed and Misbahuddin, but said it was unclear whether any more senior leaders had been killed or captured. "We are refraining from announcing or declaring until we have something in hand — some proof, some smoking gun," General Abbas said.

Pakistan's military has conducted two previous operations in Swat, but each involved fewer ground troops than this offensive, and they were criticized as causing too much harm to civilians without discernible gains against the Taliban.

Now, General Abbas said, the Pakistani public seems to be firmly behind the expanded offensive. "The military feels it's in a much better position to finish the job because it has public support," he said.

Soldiers' deaths have been commemorated in emotional public ceremonies, and news channels have been praising troops with segments with headlines like "All the Right Moves."

The fight in Swat has been against an enemy that is largely local, General Abbas said. Just 10 percent of the militants are from outside the valley, mostly from Central Asia and Afghanistan; a handful are from Waziristan, a tribal area in Pakistan's northwest that is a no-go zone for the military and a stronghold for the Taliban and [Al Qaeda](#). The military estimates that there were 5,000 militants in the valley before the operation.

"It's not a monolithic force," General Abbas said.

Pakistan has said it plans to conduct its next campaign in Waziristan.

In Mingora, militants were hiding in hotels and other private buildings, posing as civilians, General Abbas said. They had converted some buildings into bunkers. Soldiers also found five tunnels, 100 feet long and 12 feet wide, filled with arms.

The fighting has displaced what the [United Nations](#) and Pakistani officials estimate to be as

many as three million people, and Pakistan's information minister, Qamar Zaman Kaira, said the government was responding as fast as it could to the humanitarian crisis.

The military has said it is not keeping track of civilian casualties in the campaign. General Abbas said Saturday that 81 soldiers had been killed and 250 wounded since its start.

A team of 21 doctors reached Mingora on Saturday to reopen the hospital there for the wounded who have been stuck in their homes, Mr. Kaira said. The gas has been turned on, and generators are being put in place to get the water supply working.

It will take two weeks to restore electricity, which has been off since the military operation began, General Abbas said. Twenty-five tons of rations have been sent for about 40,000 people who are assumed to be stranded in Swat, he said.

"Civilians are in desperate need of provisions," General Abbas said.

May 31 AP A11

No accounting for Afghanistan aid

The job of rebuilding Afghanistan is shaping up as an ominous sequel to the massive, mistake-riddled U.S. effort to get Iraq back on its feet.

Since 2001, the U.S. has committed nearly \$33 billion for reconstruction projects in Afghanistan. Yet as President Barack Obama sends more troops and aid to quell a growing insurgency, there's been no detailed public accounting of where the money has gone and how effectively it's being spent.

As in Iraq, where the U.S. has contributed \$50 billion for rebuilding, the flow of money to Afghanistan outpaces the ability to track it. Already, an inspector general looking into the U.S. handling of Afghanistan reconstruction has found worrisome evidence of lax oversight and costly projects left foundering.

Afghanistan presents difficult challenges. It lacks Iraq's modern infrastructure and oil to generate revenue. Work sites are often in remote and primitive locations, making it hard for investigators to keep tabs on progress and ensure contract terms are being met.

Even when projects are initially successful, there are no guarantees they'll stay that way. Afghanistan is one of the world's poorest countries and can't sustain improvements without heavy international aid. It is hamstrung by a government rife with corruption, by a thriving drug trade, by weak procurement rules and by lax enforcement.

A U.S. government watchdog to oversee the American tax dollars pouring into projects throughout Afghanistan wasn't even created until 2008 — seven years after U.S. troops invaded the country to hunt down al-Qaida members and oust the Taliban.

The office of the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, led by retired Marine Corps Gen. Arnold Fields, still lacks staff and money needed to do its job properly.

"We probably should have done this several years before now," says the understated Fields. "I think we may have lost some ground that we are now trying to make up."

But even its early efforts show troubling signs. In its first audit report, released this past Tuesday, Fields' office reported that a military command in Kabul managing \$15 billion in U.S. programs to develop Afghanistan's security forces cannot be sure the money is being spent

wisely.

The auditors examined a \$404 million training contract held by a large U.S. consulting company and found the government official responsible for monitoring the vendor's performance worked at an Army office in Maryland — nine time zones away.

More cause for concern is found in Khost, a town on Afghanistan's violent border with Pakistan, where a failed electric power station points to the inability to sustain critical projects.

At a cost of \$1 million, the power generation plant in Khost was transformed from a dilapidated building into a modern facility with three newly installed generators.

In September 2008, the fully functioning plant was turned over to Khost's ministry of energy and water. When U.S. inspectors visited the site in March, only one generator was still operating and only at 60 percent of capacity. The plant's manager said the two generators out of commission were missing parts.

U.S. money also was used to train 25 poor women to cultivate and sell saffron, a spice being promoted in Afghanistan as an alternative to growing opium poppies. The project was completed on time and on budget. But Afghan authorities didn't have the resources to keep the program going for the two years needed to make it self-sustaining.

Fields has been to Afghanistan twice in the past few months. Both times he has met with Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai, who Fields says has pleaded for help in battling corruption inside his government.

Transparency International, a nongovernment organization based in Berlin, ranked Afghanistan 176 out of 180 countries on its corruption perceptions index last year. The index assesses the degree to which corruption is perceived to exist among public officials and politicians. Only Haiti, Iraq, Myanmar and Somalia were rated lower.

Fields passed Karzai's requests to the departments of State and Defense. He's received little response.

"I'm not satisfied," Fields said.

Fields' office isn't the first or only oversight organization with an eye on Afghanistan. The departments of Defense and State, along with the U.S. Agency for International Development, all have inspectors general. But their focus tends be on their agency's operations, not the bigger picture.

Stuart Bowen, Fields' hard-charging counterpart in Iraq, has showed that a watchdog with a wide view is essential for such an enormous undertaking.

Bowen has been on the job since October 2004. His office has issued 276 audit and inspection reports. Its investigative and oversight work has resulted in 21 criminal indictments.

In January, he published "Hard Lessons," a grim history of how Iraq's rebuilding spiraled from a prewar estimate of \$2.4 billion to nearly 25 times that much.

"There was a lot of waste," Bowen said. "Billions of dollars in waste."

At a congressional hearing in March, Bowen recounted a recent meeting with a business executive whose company did electrical contracting in Iraq and is now working in Afghanistan.

He told Bowen all his reports about Iraq were on the mark.

"Then he said, 'I want to tell you that the same thing is going on in Afghanistan,'" Bowen said.

June 1 AP A8

Looking for the Taliban

Lt. Eric Schwirian speaks softly, smiles a lot and shakes many wary hands during his platoon's three-day trek deep into an Afghan valley, looking for a fight with the Taliban.

But while thousands of extra troops have poured into Afghanistan this year in an escalating conflict, this unit in the central Afghan province of Wardak has barely had a sighting of its quarry.

It's frustrating for these infantrymen to feel as though they're chasing ghosts among the villages and terraced fields, but their daily routine — patience, presence, tea-drinking and handshakes — is central to America's counterinsurgency strategy.

The platoon is part of a 3,000-strong brigade from the New York-based 10th Mountain Division that deployed in the provinces of Logar and Wardak, at the gates of Kabul. The brigade came in after the Taliban started wreaking havoc on the roads, ambushing convoys, killing government officials and feeding a perception that the capital was under siege.

The fight in Wardak province now involves more roadside bombs and less direct confrontation than what other troops are facing in the eastern provinces bordering Pakistan and the south. That's where the insurgency is the strongest and where most of the 21,000 extra troops sent by U.S. President Barack Obama will deploy.

The U.S. military expects roadside and suicide bombings to spike by 50 percent this year. Taliban bombings killed 172 U.S. and other soldiers last year, according to military figures, and far more Afghan civilians.

"It is more like playing 'dodge the bomb,'" says Capt. James McCuney, the 40-year-old Pittsburgh man supervising the platoons that patrol the valley. Almost all attacks on his men have been roadside bomb blasts, but no one has died, McCuney says.

The Taliban have learned that firefights with better trained and armed U.S. troops get them killed. So American units have to go hunting for them, even make sitting ducks of themselves to lure the Taliban out in the open. "It's incredible what one has to do to get into a scrap," McCuney says.

As Schwirian's platoon readies for a night patrol under a rising moon, last orders are given. A few men smoke cigars. Barely in their 20s, the soldiers are already veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. "Hallelujah, lock and load," is stenciled on the windshield of a heavily armored truck, alongside "Never going home."

The men drive off slowly for several miles along bumpy dirt roads, lights dimmed, night-vision goggles on. Midway, Schwirian stops the convoy. He leads a squad on foot, looking for weapons caches near a village graveyard. Nothing is found.

They're near the spot where weeks earlier a roadside bomb blew up a vehicle of Afghan guards, killing three of them. The twisted and blackened wreck still lies by the road.

At the edge of the bazaar of the village of Omar Kheil, the patrol fords a river and beds down, some sleeping under the trucks, others inside them, curled in fetal position. It's uncomfortable.

Next morning the platoon moves through the Nerkh Valley, stopping to chat with villagers. The squads walk for hours through creek beds and over a punishing terrain of boulders washed down from the high mountains. The heavy guns mounted on their vehicle shadow them all the way.

Each time they reach a village, the routine is the same: First to approach them are children, sent by the grown-ups to check out the strangers. Then the fathers follow, and conversation begins.

Schwirian's gut tells him the Taliban are around. "I can sense they have influence here," says the 24-year-old from Collegeville, Pa.

Few of the villagers hide the fact that insurgents are around. At the mosque in Tatar, a village of mud and stone houses, terraced wheat fields and apple orchards, Schwirian asks Gul Wali Tatar, a 35-year-old father of six, whether the Taliban harasses his people.

"No," Tatar says. "They just come on patrol, day and night, and they do not harass people. They just walk through the fields."

They do more or less what you are doing, he tells the young lieutenant.

"Make sure he understands that we are here to help them, and the Taliban are here only to hurt them," Schwirian tells his translator, an Afghan teen known to all as Rocky. "The security of the village is my priority."

Almost everywhere they go, the Americans are told the women and children are afraid of them. Yet in hamlet after hamlet, children swarm around the troops, asking for pens and candy. A hunchbacked kid in a New York Yankees cap shakes soldiers' hands and smiles.

Another offers them a picture of scantily clad Indian movie star, then tries to sell the soldiers hashish, only to be chased away by Sgt. 1st Class Jason Sabatke.

Weeks before the patrol arrived, the Taliban attacked a U.S. special forces team in this valley with machine-guns and rocket-propelled grenades.

The villagers say they cannot remember when government officials last visited them. Many of the schoolchildren go to class carrying just one book, the Quran, wrapped in a colorful shawl. At another village, Haji Mohammad Anwar waves to the soldiers and invites them for tea and freshly baked flat bread. They sit in his large mud-brick compound, the women staring at them through windows.

"The people living in this village have no links to the Taliban," Anwar says. "They are poor farmers. At night we do not go out of our houses."

Anwar is the village malik, or leader. In a roundabout way, when no other villagers are listening, he chides the Americans for coming unannounced and in force.

"It is good to talk to each other," Anwar says. "But it is not good to come on patrol like this, and put the vehicles on top of the hills," he says, motioning to the truck strategically parked above the compound.

A mile or so deeper into the valley, in the village of Sultan Kheil, a half-dozen youngsters in white tunics and brand-new running shoes stand out among a group of grimy old farmers. The older men, some barefoot, seem to defer to them. This is unusual — it's the elders who are venerated and the young who show them obeisance.

Are these young men with the Taliban? There's no way of knowing for sure, but the troops are suspicious.

"They do not like us here," says Sgt. Michael Waxler, a 26-year-old Californian. The tense moment passes, and then orders arrive to return to base. Awaiting them are showers, hot meals and bunk beds. Soon they'll be back on patrol.

June 7 AP A12

Kidnaps cash-in in Pakistan

The three gunmen forced the car carrying the Hindu filmmaker to stop along the bumpy street, then injected him and his driver with a sedative. The driver woke up a few hours later. The filmmaker was gone.

Six months later, in April, Satish Anand was recovered in Bannu in northwest Pakistan, according to an official involved in negotiating for his release. He is one of the most prominent Pakistanis yet to be abducted, and militants are suspected.

The rise in kidnappings comes as a floundering economy leads more people to commit crime in this Muslim-majority country of 170 million people. It's also a result of the overall erosion of security as Pakistan faces spreading Islamist militancy. Criminals are suspected in most kidnappings, but the Taliban and other militant groups are thought to earn a slice of the money - possibly millions of dollars, officials say.

Police say militants and criminals are hard to separate, making it difficult to trace the money obtained through ransoms. Some criminals call themselves Taliban to inject more fear into negotiations, while others work in cahoots with militant groups.

"There's a nexus between these miscreants, these militants, and the criminals," said Malik Naveed Khan, top police official for the North West Frontier Province. "The police do not have enough resources to fight militancy and crime at the same time."

Although there have been some high-profile kidnappings of foreigners, including the eventually recovered American U.N. employee John Solecki, most abductions target Pakistanis.

The kidnapping wave is especially acute in Peshawar and Karachi, two major cities that have long been magnets for militants.

Peshawar is the main town in Pakistan's northwest, a region along the Afghan border that is most troubled by the insurgency. Businessmen and entertainers are favorite targets.

The number of kidnapping for ransom cases registered in the North West Frontier Province has risen from 57 in 2006 to 147 in 2008, police said. So far this year, 71 such cases have been recorded in the region of more than 20 million residents.

Last year, a 27-year-old male model from Peshawar decided things had gotten so tense that he started to carry a pistol to protect himself. It came in handy months later, when three men grabbed him and shoved him into a car.

"I was just like, 'What's happening?'" he recounted to The Associated Press, his eyes welling with tears. "At first, I was just blank. Then I realized I had my gun. I pulled it out, put it at the back of the driver's head and threatened to blow a hole in it."

The men quickly pushed him out of the car. He asked that the AP not publish his name due to

security fears, and has since left the frontier city.

The southern port city of Karachi is also a prime hunting ground for kidnapping rings because it is home to many of the business elite. It is Pakistan's most populous city, with more than 16 million people.

The Citizens Police Liaison Committee, a well-established and largely volunteer-run organization that works with police to retrieve abductees, said the number of kidnappings for ransom in 2008 in the city was 92, up from 64 the previous year. In 2006, the figure was just 28.

In any case, official statistics are probably an undercount. Many families don't file complaints due to threats by the kidnappers. Sharfuddin Memon, the head of the committee, gave the account of the kidnapping of the filmmaker, Anand, who is not speaking to the media.

An intelligence memo obtained by the AP warned of a growing Taliban presence in Karachi. It said many militants use the hub as a primary base for fundraising through illegal activities, including kidnapping for ransom.

The sums demanded can run into the millions of dollars, though the captors often settle for less. In one recent case, a kidnapping ring was demanding \$2.5 million. The victim was recovered by security forces, and said he'd been kept in chains that turned so hot in the sun they burned his skin.

In April, a 21-year-old Karachi man belonging to a family involved in henna manufacturing was snatched.

He was at a factory when four armed men showed up, demanded him by name and whisked him away. Then they called his family and threatened to kill him unless relatives paid a sum they couldn't afford.

Days later, his father was still in shock.

"I am trying to stay strong. He is my only son!" the 51-year-old patriarch told AP. He asked that his son's and family's name be kept confidential to avoid harming ongoing negotiations for his release.

While well-armed, organized gangs are often behind the long-term abductions, "short-term" kidnappings also are up, said Zubair Motiwala, a former president of the Karachi Chamber of Commerce and Industry. In such kidnappings, the abductors typically grab someone and drive them around in a vehicle for a few hours while negotiating with relatives. Motiwala said he knows at least eight people taken captive in the past four years.

Such kidnappings are probably fueled by an economy in such bad shape that it recently received a \$7.6 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund. The economy has recently shown some signs of stabilizing.

But it's a vicious cycle. The security situation puts off would-be foreign investors, adding to the economic struggles that are fueling crime in the first place.

It doesn't help that Pakistan's government institutions, especially the under-equipped, undermanned and corruption-riddled police, are already weak. The growing militant movements target security forces and further chip away at people's confidence in the government's ability to protect them.

Many Pakistanis have begun to arm themselves for security. Others have turned to bodyguards and upgraded protection around their homes. Many try to keep a low profile and restrict their movements, even varying the routes they take.

The militants who grabbed the 21-year-old Karachi man in April have repeatedly threatened to kill him if the family doesn't pay up, but have also extended their deadlines. The victim's father was desperate for the militants to come to terms.

"I request that they have mercy in the name of God," he said.

June 8 AP A1

Lax oversight found in wartime spending

The Defense Department has failed to provide adequate oversight over tens of billions of dollars in contracts to support military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, says a new report by an independent commission investigating waste and fraud in wartime spending.

U.S. reliance on private sector employees has grown to "unprecedented proportions," yet the government has no central database of who all these contractors are, what they do or how much they're paid, the bipartisan commission found.

In its first report to Congress, the Wartime Contracting Commission presents a bleak assessment of how taxpayer dollars have been spent since 2001. The 111-page report, obtained by The Associated Press, documents poor management, weak oversight, and a failure to learn from past mistakes as recurring themes in wartime contracting.

The commission's report is scheduled to be made public Wednesday at a hearing held by the House Oversight and Government Reform's national security subcommittee.

One example of wasted money cited by the commission involves construction of a \$30 million dining facility at a U.S. base in Iraq scheduled to be completed Dec. 25. The decision to build it was based on bad planning and botched paperwork. Yet the project is too far along to stop, making the mess hall a future monument to the waste and inefficiency plaguing the war effort.

The commission, established by Congress last year, says more than 240,000 private sector employees are supporting military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thousands more work for the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development.

In Iraq, the panel worries that as U.S. troops depart in larger numbers, too few government eyes will be on the contractors left to oversee the closing of hundreds of bases and disposal of mountains of federal property.

At Rustamiyah, a seven-acre forward operating base turned over to the Iraqis in March, the military population plunged from 1,490 to 62 in just three months. During the same period, the contractor population dropped from 928 to 338, leaving more than five contractors for every service member.

In Afghanistan, where President Barack Obama has ordered a large increase of U.S. troops, existing bases will have to expand and new ones will be built — without proper oversight unless the Pentagon rapidly changes course.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates wants to reduce the military's reliance on contractors and hire more government employees and acquisition staff. These steps will begin a badly needed overhaul of the military's approach to contract management, the commission says.

One commander in Afghanistan told the commission he had no idea how many contractors were on and off his base on a daily basis. Another officer said he had property all over his installation but didn't know who owned it or what kind of shape it was in.

There are questionable construction projects in Afghanistan, too. The commission visited the New Kabul Compound, a building intended to serve as headquarters for U.S. forces in Afghanistan. But members saw cracks in the structure, broken and leaking pipes, sinking sidewalks and other defects.

"The Army should not have accepted a building in such condition," the report says.

The commission cites concerns with a massive support contract known as "LOGCAP" that provides troops with essential services, including housing, meals, mail delivery and laundry.

Despite the huge size and importance of the contract, the main program office managing the work for both Afghanistan and Iraq has only 13 government employees. For administrative help, it relies on a contractor.

KBR Inc., the primary LOGCAP contractor in Iraq, has been paid nearly \$32 billion since 2001. The commission says billions of dollars of that amount ended up wasted due to poorly defined work orders, inadequate oversight and contractor inefficiencies.

In one example, defense auditors challenged KBR after it billed the government for \$100 million in costs for private security even though the contract prohibited the use of for-hire guards. KBR has defended its performance and criticized the commission for making "biased" statements against the company.

"As we look back on what we've done, we're real proud of being able to go into a war theater like that as a private contractor and support 200,000 troops," William P. Utt, chairman of the Houston-based KBR, said in May in an interview with AP reporters and editors.

KBR is also linked to the dining hall construction snafu, although the commission faults the military's planning and not the contractor. With American forces scheduled to leave Iraq by the end of 2011, the U.S. will use the new facility for two years at most.

In July 2008, the Army said a new dining facility was badly needed at the Camp Delta forward operating base because the existing one was too small, had a saggy ceiling, poor lighting and an unsanitary wooden floor.

KBR was awarded a contract in September. Work began in late October as American and Iraqi officials negotiated the agreement setting the dates for the U.S. troop withdrawal.

But during an April visit to Camp Delta, the commission learned that the existing mess hall had just been renovated. The \$3.36 million job was done by KBR and completed in June 2008. Commission staff toured the renovated hall "without seeing or hearing of any problems or shortfalls," the report says.

The decision to push ahead with the new hall was based on paperwork that was never updated and a failure to review the need for the project after the security agreement was signed. Most of the materials have been ordered and construction is well under way. That means canceling the project would save little money because KBR would have a legitimate claim for payment based on the investment it has already made.

June 14 New York Times A16

Afghan troops ill-equipped to fight

The Afghan foot patrol descended a mountain and slipped through a canyon. Then things went wrong. One Afghan soldier insulted another. And there, exposed on dangerous ground, a scuffle erupted.

The soldiers turned on each other with shoves, punches and kicks. One swung an ammunition can in a slow-motion haymaker. The patrol had already been hapless: a display of errant marksmanship, dud ammunition and lackluster technique.

“For months I’ve been telling everyone how proud I am of you,” seethed an American captain, yanking the Afghans apart. “Today you embarrassed me.”

The Obama administration has put a priority on expanding the size and abilities of Afghanistan’s security forces, first to help fight an expanding war and eventually to allow the Pentagon to draw down its troops. The task was inherited from the Bush administration, and the United States has helped to field roughly 170,000 Afghan soldiers and police officers in units created from scratch. In plans now under review, these numbers could double.

Many Afghan units, especially in the army, have shown signs of competence at basic missions and skills. But this joint patrol late last year in Nuristan Province, and dozens of others from 2007 to this spring, along with interviews with trainers and the senior officers who supervise them, showed problems on the Afghan and American sides alike.

American training units have been short-staffed and overstretched. Essential equipment has at times proved to be in poor condition or mismatched. Accountability for weapons and munitions has been broadly criticized.

Among the Afghans, mass illiteracy, equipment loss, crime and corruption, which is prevalent in the police, have blunted readiness. Immaturity and ill discipline bedevil many units. Illicit drug use persists, and some American officers worry about loyalty and intelligence leaks.

The Americans started rebuilding Afghanistan even before a similar effort in Iraq, where the Pentagon badly underestimated the difficulties — and initially overstated its success. Iraqi forces now operate broadly in their country.

American trainers in Afghanistan attend courses taught by veterans of the Iraq experience, and the lessons learned from Iraq are distilled into plans for Afghanistan, the training command says.

Those plans are ambitious. In Afghanistan, the Pentagon wants to make Afghanistan’s military able to direct artillery and airstrikes, and to develop an air corps with attack aircraft. And Western trainers are emphasizing supervisory skills required for a professional force: personnel and payroll management, logistics and maintenance.

Simultaneously, the Afghan government plans to require police officers to undergo drug testing and senior police officials to disclose personal assets. The United States is also entering Afghan soldiers and officers into a biometrics database, to verify identities and scrub payrolls of members who do not exist.

“We’re making a lot of progress,” said Maj. Gen. Richard P. Formica, who leads the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan, the unit coordinating the training.

The United States has spent more than \$15 billion fielding Afghan forces, by the command’s tally. Officers throughout the ranks say Afghan security self-sufficiency is years off, even in the Afghan National Army, or A.N.A.

"I think if you come back in a couple of years, you should see advances," said Brig. Gen. Anthony R. Ierardi, the command's deputy commander. "I wouldn't tell you that the A.N.A. is going to be ready across the board in a couple of years. I don't think that's a true statement."

Rebooting the Police

American officers training the Afghan forces describe two different views. By one view, the security forces, especially the army, represent one of the most promising institutions the Afghan government has yet offered: a large group of men who rejected the Taliban and staked their lives on the faith that the government would prevail.

Seasoned by fighting and shaped by Western trainers, a corps of Afghan officers and noncommissioned officers has begun to emerge. The units they lead have allowed the Afghan government to provide security in Kabul and extend the government's presence to areas once beyond reach.

The forces' casualty figures point to the loyalty and resolve of many Afghans in uniform. Nearly 1,700 police officers and 600 Afghan soldiers were killed on duty from January 2007 through April. Western forces suffered 586 deaths in that time.

By another view, the same forces, though most pointedly the police, are minimally skilled, unreliable, prone to crime and little match for an insurgency that has grown since 2006. Problems are widespread enough that many Western soldiers openly regard the Afghan police with suspicion.

In interviews over three years, American soldiers have complained that police officers and supervisors sell promotions and equipment, skim subordinates' wages, shake down villagers, take bribes or participate in other schemes, including the opium trade.

Journalists for The New York Times have seen officers accused of selling fuel for their American-provided trucks, and of burglarizing a home they had been ordered to search. Officers at one southern post in 2007 were cultivating poppy plants inside their post's walls.

Maj. Vincent G. Heintz, who supervised a police mentoring team last year, said that the district where he worked, Chahar Darreh in Kunduz Province, cycled through several Afghan commanders during the year, including one who was "wholly incompetent" but apparently politically connected.

The next commander, Major Heintz said, was "a professional criminal who brokered a détente with the local Taliban" and who showed up with 10 or 15 of his own bodyguards, fired the police and put his gang into police uniforms. They then set up roadblocks and shook down motorists, he said.

Afghan units have also not eradicated the presence of "chai" boys, who often are uncompensated teenagers who live closely with commanders. Afghans and American officers say some are apprentices, others valets, and some suffer sexual abuse, which a few commanders regard as a perquisite of power.

The training command said that if abuse of these teenagers was reported, it would be acted on. "It is totally unacceptable," General Ierardi said, but added that he had not seen reports of it from the field.

American officers acknowledge that corruption has hampered efforts to make a viable police

force, which now has about 82,000 members. They also say corruption should not define all the officers serving, and that burnishing the force's skills and reputation is a focus.

Last fall, President Hamid Karzai appointed a new interior minister, Muhammad Hanif Atmar, a former education minister. Mr. Atmar, educated in Britain and largely viewed as uncorrupt, has pushed for changes that could foster credibility, including requiring senior officials to disclose private assets and testing the A.N.P, or Afghan National Police, for drugs.

Officers testing positive can be fired, said Brig. Gen. Anne Macdonald, who supervises police development.

The United States is also retraining uniformed police units in a process called Focused District Development. Under this program, police units in districts are mentored intensely through phases, including being replaced by an interim unit for several weeks while they undergo refresher training and have their equipment inventoried, examined and, as necessary, replaced.

The program implicitly acknowledges problems. General Ierardi said it was essential because it provided a chance to "refresh the screen." To date, 65 of the country's 365 districts and 12 companies have enrolled in the program. The Pentagon plans to expand the training.

The program has shown merits, officers said. Major Heintz, for instance, said that in his duties under the program, following up on the police in Chahar Darreh, he was able to get the crooked commander relieved less than a month after he showed up. The new commander "has done a good job with the force," he said.

Improving the Army

The situation is different in the army, for which the American effort is trying to build momentum, General Formica said. The Afghan Army has nearly 90,000 soldiers and is slated to grow to 134,000.

In units on the ground, some previous initiatives have shown results.

On patrols observed by The Times this year, many Afghan soldiers wore their equipment, remained alert, walked with weapons ready and moved by bounds across dangerous ground. These are not difficult tasks, but on patrols in past years Afghans often neglected them.

Sgt. Maj. Arthur L. Coleman Jr., the senior American enlisted soldier in the training command, said improved fundamentals reflected a significant development: the army has grown experienced sergeants, who enhance performance.

"We're really starting to see discipline," he said. "You're starting to see accountability." He added: "That's going to pay big dividends down the road as we mature."

Other indicators also suggest that military discipline, while behind Western standards, is improving. The army's percentage of soldiers absent without leave has dropped to under 10 percent for more than a year, the command said. Not long ago, it exceeded 15 percent.

This year, an inaugural class of 84 lieutenants graduated from the National Military Academy of Afghanistan, a four-year school modeled after West Point. Next year the academy is scheduled to produce about 300 more lieutenants. The Pentagon hopes to build a more able military around these and other new officers and sergeants.

Enlisted soldiers with specialties are also appearing in the field. Of a squad of Afghan soldiers recently assigned in the Korangal Valley, for example, one had been trained as a trauma medic. The training command said 3,500 such medics had completed an eight-week course.

But poor officers remain. During an insurgent mortar attack late last year, an Afghan lieutenant did not require his soldiers to take cover or put on their protective gear. Instead, he proposed holding a formation in the open to ask which soldiers were collaborating with the Taliban.

Two American Marines present directed the lieutenant to order his soldiers to safety. Minutes later, an incoming round exploded yards from where the soldiers were to stand.

In a recent attack on Korangal Outpost, an Afghan captain ignored his duties. Incoming 30-millimeter rounds landed among his men. He spent the fight in a latrine, while Marines checked for injured Afghans and directed the return fire.

Problems Beyond the Ranks

The Pentagon's plans have been undercut at times by the American military's own management, or by larger trends in Afghanistan's educational and economic development.

Over the years, as American units have cycled through, they have often been forced to repeat the work of previous units.

Several years ago, for example, the Americans distributed 8,000 donated Czech assault rifles to Afghan units. The weapons fired the same ammunition as existing Afghan rifles, but were otherwise incompatible. The weapons had to be recalled last year, even as the military was trying to rush other weapons to the field.

Other equipment has disappeared in vast quantities, trainers in the field said, including sleeping bags and warm clothing required to operate much of the year, especially at night. The shortages were so acute in 2007 that units in the 82nd Airborne Division canceled overnight missions because Afghan soldiers could not participate.

A year later, the same shortages limited the work of Afghans in Nuristan Province.

One American officer said Afghan soldiers had been issued the gear, often two or three times. They had either sold it or given it to their families, he said.

This year, the American military said it issued storage containers to the army, and cold-weather gear had been locked up. It will be reissued in the fall, the military said.

Events on the patrol that became an intraplatoon brawl also underlined concerns about ammunition. Much of the Afghan government's ammunition is old surplus donated by nations trimming arsenals or sold to the Pentagon by low-bidding contractors. For years, little was independently tested for reliability.

In Nuristan, the captain tried firing five rounds of 40-millimeter high-explosive ammunition at a cave. All five failed: three skipped off the cave's face without exploding; two did not leave the barrel. The captain, Markus Trouerbach, was disgusted. "Dud!" he said. "Nice dud. Great."

Later, he said that of 20 rounds fired during an exercise, 9 worked. An Afghan sergeant said he

fired seven rounds at insurgents. Two did not explode.

The training command held its own test. Of 720 40-millimeter rounds fired, 22 did not work properly, according to two American officers; the command said it heard no other complaints.

The failure rate, 3 percent, was much less alarming than the troops' experiences in Nuristan. But it exceeded by many times the acceptable failure rate of similar ammunition issued to American troops.

In interviews, three arms dealers and a manufacturer said the Pentagon paid less for the 40-millimeter ammunition than the ammunition typically costs to produce. They said Arcus, the Bulgarian firm manufacturer, provided substandard ammunition. (The vendors asked not to be identified out of fear of being blocked by the Pentagon from future bids.)

Arcus said the rounds had been made to exacting standards and passed company tests. Neither the Pentagon nor Arcus would discuss the ammunition deal in detail, including how the prices were arrived at, saying the information was proprietary.

June 17 AP A2

Senators to tackle war funding bill

War-funding legislation survived a fierce partisan battle in the House on Tuesday, a major step in providing commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan the money they would need for military operations in the coming months.

The \$106 billion measure, in addition to about \$80 billion for military operations, provides for an array of other spending priorities, including \$7.7 billion to respond to the flu pandemic and more than \$10 billion in development and security aid for Pakistan and Iraq, as well as countries such as Mexico and the nation of Georgia.

Democratic leaders pushing the bill on behalf of the Obama administration had to overcome an unusual alliance. Anti-war Democrats opposed continued war spending and Republicans condemned \$5 billion in the measure to secure a \$108 billion U.S. line of credit to the International Monetary Fund for loans to poor countries.

Rep. Howard "Buck" McKeon, R-Calif., top Republican on the Armed Services Committee, contended that Democrats were endangering troops by shifting money to create room for a "global bailout loan program."

The vote was 226-202, with five Republicans voting for the bill and 32 Democrats against it. House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md., unsuccessfully appealed to Republicans for support, saying 80 percent of the package still went to the troops. "Stand up for them," he said.

The Senate could move as early as this week on the legislation, which includes \$1 billion to fund government rebates for consumers who trade in their old vehicles for more fuel-efficient models.

The Pentagon has said that without the bill, the Army could start running out of war funds as early as July. President Obama has argued that it is crucial to winding down operations in Iraq while boosting personnel and fighting power in Afghanistan.

Republicans also objected to a decision by House-Senate negotiators to remove a provision prohibiting the release of photos depicting U.S. troops abusing detainees. It was taken out, "at the demands of the fringe left," said House Republican leader John Boehner, R-Ohio.

Obama, in negotiating the removal of the provision, guaranteed that he would stop the release of such photos.

June 21 AP A21

Extortion, 'charities' fund terrorists

He moved his finger slowly across his throat, to show that the Taliban kills truckers who don't pay for safe passage through large swaths of territory near Afghanistan.

"The situation is very dangerous for us. We give them money or our fuel, or they kill us," said Ghadr Gul, a middle-aged trucker, who reluctantly spoke to The Associated Press outside his oil tanker. Along the road, storage depots are piled high with the burned-out hulks of vehicles destroyed by the Taliban.

As the Taliban gains power in Afghanistan and Pakistan, its money is coming mostly from extortion, crime and drugs, the AP found in an investigation into the financial network of militants in the region. However, funding for the broader-based al-Qaida appears to be more diverse, including money from new recruits, increasingly large donations from sympathizers and Islamic charities, and a cut of profits from honey dealers in Yemen and Pakistan who belong to the same Wahabi sect of Islam.

"With respect to the Taliban, the narco dollars are a major if not majority of their funding sources, and I think add in there as well extortion and kidnapping," said Juan Carlos, a former U.S. National Security Council adviser on terrorism who now works at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. "With al-Qaida I think it is a mixed bag. They draw benefits from the Taliban but they are not relying wholesale on narcotics. They still rely on sympathetic donors and to a certain extent charities."

Afghanistan produces more opium than any other country in the world. The Taliban charges drug kingpins to move the opium through its territory, for what the United Nations estimates could run upward of \$300 million annually.

The Taliban euphemistically refers to extortion money as tolls, taxes or even zakat, the 2.5 percent of donation to charity that Islam requires. A kidnapped Pakistani businessman had to pay more than 10 million rupees (\$125,000) in ransom. When his Taliban captors freed him, he said, they told him, "Think of this as your zakat. Now your place in heaven is guaranteed."

Money from drugs and criminal gangs make up roughly 85 to 90 percent of Taliban revenue, estimates John Solomon, a terrorism expert with U.S Military Academy's Counter Terrorism Center. In Pakistan alone, Owais Ghani, governor of northwest Pakistan, puts the Taliban's annual earnings at roughly four billion rupees (\$50 million).

Taliban foot soldiers are paid \$100 a month, almost \$20 more than the average Pakistani policeman. A Taliban commander makes upward of \$350 a month, or nearly a third of the average annual salary of most Pakistanis.

The money also goes a long way because explosives are available locally and cheaply, said a senior Pakistani security official. The explosive devices that kill U.S., NATO and Pakistani troops cost less than \$100 each to make, said the official, who asked not to be named to avoid compromising his job. The training to make, place and detonate the devices likely comes from al-Qaida, he said.

The informal money transfer system known as hawala or hundi is also still flourishing in Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Middle East, Europe and the United States. During his tenure that ended in 2007, Pakistan's former prime minister, Shaukat Aziz, said upward of \$5 billion went out of Pakistan every year through this system, which operates without regulation and moves money with just a phone call. Mostly it's corrupt politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen getting their ill-gotten windfalls out

of the country, but terrorists also piggyback onto the system, say financial investigators.

In three of the last five years, the No. 1 source of money into Pakistan through this hawala system has been the United States, according to the Pakistani security official. He couldn't say how much of the money went to terrorists and how much was sent from Pakistanis abroad to their families.

After the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the financial crackdown closed some of al-Qaida's most lucrative sources of funding. But with the help of the hawala system, al-Qaida has since re-established its money line, latching onto Taliban crime while making a modest comeback on illicit business and donations after the American-led invasion of Iraq, according to interviews with jihadis, traders, security officials and terrorism experts.

In the last two years, al-Qaida has turned up the call for donations, told new recruits to bring money with them, and shown signs of being more frugal. For analysts, that adds up to one of two things: Either al-Qaida is saving up for another 9/11-style attack, or the crackdown of the last nine years has curbed its fundraising abilities. It could mean both.

"Al Qaida has conserved its funding to allow for continued high-value training and plotting," said Carlos, the terrorism adviser. "I think to a certain extent al-Qaida will find ways of funding more things that are important to them. And to a certain extent it might explain a lot of questions of why we haven't seen another major attack on the scale of 9/11 -- in part because of the disruptive effort, part of it is luck and part of it is financing constraints."

Estimates of al-Qaida's annual budget needs vary wildly from \$300 million to as low as \$10 million.

Carlos, who estimates al-Qaida's needs as "modest," said its big expenses are payments to families; food and shelter to maintain operations; travel and logistics; money for cells engaged in plots; bribes, and expenses for longer-range plans such as an anthrax program.

Some Islamic charities with known al-Qaida connections have quietly renamed themselves and continued to operate. In Pakistan, charities with links to terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba and al-Qaida, but operating under new names, have cashed in on natural disasters such as the devastating 2005 earthquake and the current refugee crisis from the Swat Valley to replenish their finances. In Kuwait, the Revival Islamic Heritage Society, believed by the U.S. to heavily finance al-Qaida, still operates.

Because of demands from the International Monetary Fund, Pakistan has removed restrictions on the amount of money that can be brought into the country, said Pakistani financial intelligence director, Azhar Quereshi. But Pakistan has limited to \$10,000 the money that can leave the country, cracking down on some of the biggest hawala dealers.

"Once the money is inside the country, it is difficult to locate it. Smugglers and transporters help finance the Taliban either out of sympathy for their cause or because they are being forced to give a share," said the Pakistani security official who asked not to be identified.

Militants also said a cartel of Pakistani honey dealers is back in business, laundering money and moving drugs to support al-Qaida. The scale is smaller than in 2001, but revenues to the terrorists are steady.

A former fighter with Afghanistan's wanted guerrilla leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar said honey is sent from Pakistan with an inflated price tag to markets in the Middle East - mostly Saudi Arabia, Dubai and Kuwait. The profits are returned and sent by courier to al-Qaida.

Honey dealers in Peshawar who didn't want to be identified for fear of harassment by the authorities said that there is no al-Qaida link to their sales. One honey dealer said the outlawed Al Shifa Honey Press still operates in Pakistan's most populous Punjab province but said he knew of no al-Qaida affiliation.

Friend or foe? Afghan war breeds awkward alliances

Lt. Gabe Lamois's mission sounded simple: Hike down the hill to the Pakistani Frontier Corps' border post, inform the commander there that U.S. and Afghan troops were going to be moving through the area at 3 a.m., and hike back up the hill.

Before Lamois had even finished speaking, the Pakistani officer was shaking his head. "We have a lot of enemies here," Lt. Ghulam Habib explained. His jittery troops might mistake the Americans for the Taliban and shoot them.

"How about 4 a.m.?" Lamois asked.

"Impossible; 7 a.m.," Habib countered.

The haggling turned to pleading before they settled on 5:30 a.m. Lamois walked off, and the Pakistani commander, eager to demonstrate that he was in charge of the area, trained his machine guns and mortar tubes on the U.S. campsite, about 500 yards away.

"It's a strange relationship, considering we're supposed to be allies," Lamois grouched.

Senior U.S. and Pakistani officials have stepped up efforts in recent months to tame the chaotic border area, used by the Taliban as a base from which to fire rockets at U.S. positions in [Afghanistan](#) and smuggle fighters and weapons. But high-level talks have not led to cooperation on the ground, where U.S. troops are struggling to overcome decades of enmity between Afghanistan and [Pakistan](#).

"I am not sure why the [Pakistanis] are even here, except to stick a thumb in the eye of the Afghans," said Maj. Jason Dempsey, the No. 3 officer in the U.S. battalion on the border.

When 800 troops from the Army's 10th Mountain Division moved into the area in February, it marked the first large-scale U.S. presence on the border in Konar province since the invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001. The Americans had been in place only a few weeks when the local Pakistani commander summoned them and the senior Afghan commander in the area for an emergency meeting to discuss his fears that Afghan forces, backed by U.S. air power, were planning to attack Pakistani posts.

U.S. officials said the Pakistanis were angry that the Afghans were building a fort on the ridgeline between the two countries. Pakistan has long suspected that Afghanistan wants to grab Pashtun tribal lands on its side of the border. The meeting quickly became "very ugly and emotional," said Lt. Col. Mark O'Donnell, the senior U.S. officer in the area.

The Afghan commander said he needed the new border fort to hold off Taliban fighters who had fired on his troops from Pakistani army positions a few months earlier, killing four Afghan soldiers and wounding a U.S. adviser. The Pakistani colonel denied the firefight had happened, prompting the Afghan to pull out his cellphone, on which he said he had saved a video of the battle. Before he could play it, O'Donnell interceded.

To break through the suspicion, the 10th Mountain troops planned to hold a series of meetings with their Pakistani counterparts. But they quickly realized that the rugged terrain, poor Afghan roads and a shortage of U.S. helicopters made frequent visits impossible. "On the map, the border looks like it's

only three or four kilometers away," Dempsey said. "The reality is that it is a major operation for us just to get to there."

For the Taliban, it is much easier. Its fighters drive on paved Pakistani roads to the border, where they regularly launch rockets toward the U.S. bases from sites within just a few hundred yards of the Pakistani positions. **The Americans respond with a barrage of artillery. In the middle of one recent U.S. counterattack, Dempsey's Nokia cellphone chirped with a text message from his Pakistani counterpart: "Sir, rounds are falling 200-300 meters short of our post. Plz adjust your fire. Thanx."**

When they arrived in the area, the Americans assumed that the Pakistani troops were cooperating with their former Taliban allies. But after visiting the border posts, they realized that the terrified Frontier Corps soldiers were essentially prisoners in their posts. At the Karir Pass, the site of most of the Taliban rocket launches, the Pakistani troops are flown via helicopter to their border forts, each a cluster of small buildings made out of rocks, with no running water. Their food is also airlifted in every few weeks.

Although there is a paved road leading from their border post to a nearby Pakistani village, the Frontier Corps troops get their water from a natural spring in Afghanistan.

"We asked them why they didn't get their water from the Pakistani village," recalled Command Sgt. Maj. James Carabello. "They told us that if they went into the village that the Taliban would cut their heads off."

Every few weeks, a team of U.S. and Afghan soldiers flies up to the border area to kick over the Taliban rocket-launch sites and blow up Taliban safe houses, used to store weapons and food. In April, U.S. and Afghan troops destroyed 10 Taliban launch sites during a three-day operation. The enemy salvos slowed, only to start up again in early June. Although the Taliban fire is often inaccurate, military officials said, one well-placed shot at the main U.S. base in the valley could cause major casualties.

"We've got to figure out how to get some presence up there on the border," O'Donnell, the U.S. commander in the area, told his officers in mid-June. "We've been really lucky so far." A few days later, about 60 U.S. and Afghan soldiers climbed into two CH-47 Chinook helicopters that ferried them up to the mountains near the Karir Pass.

After seven minutes in the air -- a journey that would have taken a full day on foot -- the troops scrambled out of the back of the helicopters, taking cover behind crumbling fighting positions from an earlier war. Snow covered the nearby peaks. Narrow donkey trails and the dry ravines known as wadis, used by the Taliban forces to hide from U.S. surveillance aircraft, snaked through the rocky soil.

A team of U.S. and Afghan scouts marched off to search for Taliban bunkers and rocket-launch sites. Dempsey and Capt. Michael Harrison, who leads a 140-member infantry company in the area, headed off in the opposite direction to meet with Pakistani troops.

In late April, Dempsey and Harrison had shared a pot of tea with the Pakistani soldiers in their dark stone fort. This time, Habib, who had replaced the previous commander three weeks earlier, intercepted them on the mountainside and told them they were not permitted inside his base. He sent one of his privates to fetch a thermos of sweet green tea and wedged himself between two boulders and a scraggly tree.

"Do you know Captain Shahab at the Nawa Pass border fort?" Harrison asked brightly. "He's a good friend of mine. He gave me his cricket bat."

Habib, who wore a simple, tan army tunic and carried a rusted British rifle, nodded. In his new posting, he commanded about 30 soldiers. The Americans, trying to make conversation, asked him about his military career, his troops and his family. He replied that he had been a soldier for 17 years and had six young children back in Karachi.

"Now I know why you are at the border instead of back home," Dempsey joked, pulling out a snapshot of his children playing in the snow. One of Habib's privates studied the picture intently. "California?" he asked.

"No. It's New York," Dempsey said.

After a few minutes of awkward small talk, Habib asked the Americans why they had come to his border post, perched on a rocky cliff at a place that suggested the end of the world. "Someone has been shooting rockets at us from over on that ridge," Dempsey said, pointing to a stone outcropping about 250 yards away. "We wondered if you had seen anything."

"The Taliban are the enemy of Pakistan and the U.S. Army," Habib said.

"Do you ever see people firing rockets?"

"I don't know anything about it," Habib replied.

Later, the Americans trudged back up to their campsite and spent the rest of the day searching the surrounding mountains for the donkey trails the Taliban was using to move across the border. They kicked over a crudely built stone wall with black scorch marks at its base, a telltale sign that it was used for rocket launches, and they took pictures of a four-room building being built on an isolated ridge about 50 yards from the border. They also stumbled across simple graves dating to Afghanistan's war against the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

U.S. commanders have been able to slow the flow of Taliban fighters across the 90-mile stretch of border by winning over Afghans who live in the Konar River valley, which the insurgents must traverse as they move deeper into Afghanistan. But to stop the influx entirely, U.S. officials said, they must have the support of deeply suspicious Pakistani forces. One idea is to open a border coordination center on the Afghan side where commanders from all three countries could plan operations.

"Our goal is to get everyone focused on the common enemy," Dempsey said, referring to the Taliban insurgents.

As night fell on the border, explosions from the Pakistani military's ongoing fight with the Taliban in the tribal areas boomed in the distance. Taliban radio traffic, which the fighters know the Americans intercept, chattered with threats. "Shoot the infidels," a voice said in Pashto. "Hold your position. I will be there soon," another said. But the attack never came.

Next morning, as the sun began to crest the Hindu Kush mountains, the U.S. and Afghan troops hiked down to Habib's border fort, ignoring the Pakistani officer's warning to wait until 5:30 a.m. to pass. Testily, Habib told them to detour around his outpost, prompting one of the Afghan soldiers to

chamber a round in his rifle.

A U.S. adviser to the Afghan army quickly interceded. "Cut that stupid [expletive] out and keep walking," the Marine sergeant barked.

July 21 AP A2

July deadliest month for US in Afghanistan

A roadside bomb killed four American troops in eastern Afghanistan on Monday, driving the July death toll for U.S. forces to the highest monthly level of the war.

The latest deaths brought to at least 30 the number of American service members who have died in Afghanistan this month — two more than the figure for all of June 2008, which had been the deadliest month for the U.S. since the 2001 U.S.-led invasion drove the Taliban from power.

July's death toll for the entire U.S.-led coalition, which includes American, British, Canadian and other forces, stands at 55 — well over the previous record of 46 deaths suffered in June and August of 2008.

U.S. commanders had predicted a bloody summer after President Barack Obama ordered 21,000 additional U.S. troops to Afghanistan in a bid to turn the tide against a resurgent Taliban and shift the focus on the global war against Islamic extremism from Iraq.

NATO's outgoing Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer said Monday that terrorism would spread through the world if NATO forces fail in Afghanistan.

"Al-Qaida would have a free run again, and their terrorist ambitions are global," he said in a speech at London's Chatham House think tank. "Those who argue otherwise — who say we can defend against terrorism from home — are simply burying their heads in the sand."

Defense Secretary Robert Gates has warned that U.S.-led forces must demonstrate progress in Afghanistan by next summer or face a public perception that the conflict cannot be won. Heavy losses this month have already triggered a public debate in Britain that the war in Afghanistan may not be worth the price.

With more troops in the country, American and British forces have been striking deeper into Taliban strongholds in the south, hoping to establish enough security for Afghans to choose a president next month and cut insurgent supply lines into Pakistan.

British military authorities said Monday that bombing attacks in southern Afghanistan soared nearly 43 percent for the first five months of this year over the same period last year.

U.S. troops have also stepped up efforts in eastern Afghanistan to curb the movement of militants to and from safe havens in Pakistan's lawless tribal region.

A NATO statement said the four soldiers were killed by an improvised explosive device in the east of the country but gave no further details. A U.S. spokesman, Lt. Robert Carr, confirmed all four were Americans.

It was unclear whether the blast occurred near the area of eastern Afghanistan where Pfc. Bowe R. Bergdahl, 23, was taken captive June 30. Bergdahl appeared on a Taliban video posted on the Internet over the weekend — a move denounced by the U.S. command as a violation of international law.

Also Monday, the British Ministry of Defense announced that a British soldier was killed the day before by a roadside bomb during a foot patrol in Helmand province.

Roadside bombs now account for more than two-thirds of all casualties among the international force as the Taliban demonstrate greater skill in manufacturing and planting the explosives. Bombings rose by 25 percent in the first four months of 2009 over the same period last year, **and the U.S. command expects them to increase 50 percent this year to 5,700 — up from 3,800 last year.**

The increased threat from roadside bombs and Afghanistan's formidable terrain of high mountains and deserts have forced the international military force to rely heavily on aircraft to transport personnel and supplies around the country. The increased tempo of the conflict has strained air assets and may have been behind a series of aircraft accidents in recent weeks.

In the latest mishap, a British Tornado GR4 fighter jet crashed Monday on takeoff inside the Kandahar Airfield, but the two crewmen managed to eject safely, according to a NATO spokesman Capt. Ruben Hoornveld. British officials said the crash was not a result of hostile fire but the cause was still under investigation.

The crash occurred one day after a Russian-owned civilian Mi-8 helicopter slammed into the tarmac at the same base shortly after takeoff, killing 16 people on board. Two Americans died Saturday when their U.S. Air Force F-15E Strike Eagle fighter jet crashed in central Afghanistan.

A U.S. helicopter made a "hard landing" the same day, injuring several soldiers. U.S. officials said neither incident was due to hostile fire.

Taliban militants shot down a Moldovan-owned Mi-6 transport helicopter last week in southern Afghanistan, killing six Ukrainian civilians on board and an Afghan child on the ground.

Earlier in July, two Canadian soldiers and one British trooper were killed in a helicopter crash in Zabul province. Officials said the crash did not appear to be caused by Taliban fire. Also Monday, officials reported that at least a dozen Afghan civilians had been killed in violent incidents.

In the northern province of Kunduz on Sunday, German soldiers fired on a pickup truck approaching at high speed and suspected of carrying Taliban fighters. Provincial Gov. Mohammad Omar said three civilians were killed, but German authorities said one died. Defense Ministry spokesman Christian Dienst said in Berlin that the driver ignored warning shots before troops fired at the vehicle's engine to disable it. Three Afghans were injured and a fourth fled, Dienst said.

Prosecutors in Potsdam, where the German military's mission command center is headquartered, said they were examining evidence to determine whether to open a criminal investigation.

In the western province of Farah, a van full of civilians struck a roadside bomb Sunday, killing 11 people on board, including a child and his mother, said Mohammad Younis Rasouli, the deputy governor. The bomb was probably intended for Afghan or international troops.

July 26

AP

A3

Another Suicide Attack Leaves More Dead

For the second time in a week, Taliban fighters armed with suicide vests and automatic weapons attacked a provincial capital in eastern Afghanistan on Saturday, triggering hours-long gun battles that left seven militants dead, officials said.

The latest militant attack came less than a month before Afghanistan's Aug. 20 presidential election.

U.S. and NATO forces have stepped up operations in hopes of ensuring enough security for a strong voter turnout. The assault in Khost began when at least six Taliban fighters carrying AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenades stormed the area around the main police station and a nearby government-run bank.

All were shot and killed before they could detonate their suicide vests, the Interior Ministry said in a statement. A seventh attacker detonated a car rigged with explosives near a police rapid reaction force, wounding two policemen, the ministry said.

Interior Ministry spokesman Zemer Bashary said all the attackers were killed, but the Defense Ministry later said an eighth attacker may have escaped. The ministry said no government forces were killed but 14 people were wounded - **11 civilians and three police.**

The attack came five days after Taliban militants launched near-simultaneous assaults in Gardez, about 50 miles (80 kilometers) northwest of Khost, and in the eastern city of Jalalabad.

Six Afghan police and intelligence officers and eight militants died in the two attacks. Though the three attacks did not kill large numbers of Afghan or U.S. security forces, they showed the tenuous security situation in Afghanistan's countryside. Such attacks grab headlines in Afghanistan and raise the question of whether voters can safely go to polls.

The U.S. envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, alluded to those concerns, saying Saturday it was "extraordinary" to hold an election in the middle of war.

He said the vote faces "many complex challenges," including security issues and access to polls for women. Authorities need a respectable turnout for the results to appear credible both here and in countries supporting the government.

Holbrooke met separately with President Hamid Karzai and his top two challengers - former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah and former Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani. Abdullah told Holbrooke that he is struggling to fight Karzai's built-in advantage as president with government assets at his disposal.

The former foreign minister noted a recent election commission report that said 70 percent of election coverage on the country's state TV channel goes to Karzai.

August 9 AP A3

Taliban leader's death disputed

Senior Taliban commanders denied that their leader, Baitullah Mehsud, had been killed in a CIA missile strike, while conflicting reports emerged late Saturday that a fire fight had broken out between them during a meeting to choose a successor.

Interior Minister Rahman Malik said authorities had received information about a fight breaking out during a meeting, or shura, between groups led by Hakimullah, one of the Taliban's most powerful

commanders, and by Waliur Rehman. Both are believed to be top contenders to replace Mehsud should reports of his death prove true.

"We had the information that one of them is dead," Malik told local television. "So the information is being verified. We need to see the dead bodies, we need to do some DNA, we need to have something solid."

A senior government official, who could not be named due to the sensitivity of the situation, said there were reports that a clash occurred among Taliban guards at the gathering Saturday and that some people may have been wounded. But he said there was no credible information suggesting that any of the Taliban leaders themselves were among those hurt.

Another Taliban commander, Noor Sayed, denied to The Associated Press that there had been any quarrel between rival Taliban factions on Saturday. He said he had spoken to Waliur Rehman himself and that he was not injured.

Nevertheless, local TV stations reported that either Hakimullah or Waliur Rehman, or both, had been killed.

The meeting was being held somewhere in the lawless, rugged tribal region of Waziristan, an area off limits to journalists, and the various claims were impossible to verify independently.

August 9 AP A12

Opium ban a hardship for farmers

For as long as anyone can remember, there was no need for paper money in this remote corner of the Hindu Kush. The common currency was what grew in everyone's backyard — opium.

When children felt like buying candy, they ran into their father's fields and returned with a few grams of opium folded inside a leaf. Their mothers collected it in plastic bags, trading 18 grams for a meter of fabric or two liters of cooking oil. Even a visit to the barbershop could be settled in opium.

But the economy of this village sputtered to a halt last year when the government began aggressively enforcing a ban on opium production. Villagers were not allowed to plant their only cash crop. Now shops are empty and farmers are in debt, as entire communities spiral into poverty.

Opium is one of the biggest problems facing this troubled country, because it is deeply woven into the fabric of daily life as well as into the economics of insurgency. Afghanistan supplies 93 percent of the world's opium, and it is one of the main sources of funding for the growing Taliban movement.

Yet the government ban on opium is working at best unevenly. In areas of the country under Taliban control, opium production is going strong. In government-held areas such as Shahrān, it has gone down drastically, but at the cost of the livelihood of hundreds of thousands of people. Their anger is imperiling government support in one of the few areas of the country that has resisted the Taliban's advance.

"Now we don't even have 10 Afghanis (\$0.25) to give our children to buy bubble gum," says opium farmer Abdul Hay. "Before they would go into the field and collect the money themselves."

Two years ago, opium, the raw ingredient used to make heroin, grew on nearly half a million acres in Afghanistan. The harvest was worth about \$4 billion, or equal to nearly half the country's GDP in 2007. As much as a tenth — almost half a billion dollars — went to local strongmen, including the

Taliban, according to the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime.

Under intense international pressure, the government redoubled its effort to crack down on opium farmers. By last year, the number of acres planted with poppy had dropped by a fifth, yet the Taliban's finances remained largely untouched. Ninety-eight percent of Afghanistan's opium is now grown in just seven of the country's 34 provinces — all areas under partial or total Taliban control.

Opium was so entrenched in Badakshan province, where Shahran is located, that it is said Marco Polo sampled it when he passed through in the 13th century. Until recently, the sloping mountain faces were awash with pink, purple and magenta poppies, nodding in the wind. But in the past year, poppy production has gone down 95 percent.

The villagers here held a meeting and decided two years ago not to plant opium, after government radio messages warned that poppy fields would be destroyed and opium growers jailed. Posters distributed throughout the area showed a man with his hands bound by the stem of the opium poppy.

The villagers say they did as the government told them, and planted their fields with wheat, barley, mustard and melons. But these crops need more care than the tough opium poppy, which will bloom with little water or fertilizer.

Most of the wheat fields yielded little because the farmers couldn't afford to fertilize the land. Even where yields were decent, farmers say they could have earned between two and 10 times more by planting the same land with opium.

"See this mustard? It can take care of my family for one month," says 25-year-old farmer Abdul Saboor, pulling up a shoot of the green plant and snapping it open with his teeth. "When we planted opium in this same plot, it took care of all our expenses for an entire year."

The hole in the economy is swallowing up the community, from the farmer to the turbaned shopkeepers whose scales used for weighing opium now sit idle.

Every month, shopkeeper Abdul Ahmed used to bring \$20,000 worth of goods to sell in the bazaar. It's been four months since his last truckload, and he has only sold \$1,000. Ahmed is one of 40 traders left; there used to be 400.

"We open in the morning and go back at night. No money comes in. No one buys anything," says Ahmed. "There is no money left in this village. Opium is the only income we had."

Villagers say desperation is pushing hundreds to immigrate to neighboring Iran, where they work as day laborers. Farmers throughout the region are also sinking deeply into debt. They borrow money to buy staples such as rice and oil, which they used to buy with opium. They also take loans to buy seeds and fertilizer and to rent donkeys to take the wheat to market — an expense opium did not bring because all the local shops accepted it as legal tender.

On a hill flanking the highway in Argu District, a four-hour drive southeast of here, a thin farmer is bent over cutting wheat with a hand-held sickle. Abdul Mahin says he is several hundred dollars in debt to the man who sold him fertilizer.

"If we plant two bags of wheat, then we'll have just enough money to buy the seeds to plant

another two bags of wheat," says the gray-bearded farmer. "We're going backwards. Of course we're angry at the government."

A small number of farmers in other towns are planting opium despite the ban. Most are seeing their fields destroyed, as government agents intensify patrols.

Farmer Abdulhamid, 55, says he has only rain-fed land, and none of it is irrigated. So he can't grow wheat and barley with much success. Unless the government helps, he says, he will have to plant opium again.

"We are getting poorer day by day," says Abdulhamid, in the village of Pengani. "What should I do? Kill my children so that I don't have to feed them?"

When farmers were asked to stop planting, they were promised help from the government. Badakshan is set to receive \$1,000 for each hectare (roughly 2 1/2 acres) of land freed of poppies — some \$10 million this year. It's being used to build three clinics and three schools, pave a major road and rebuild six fallen bridges.

Farmers say a distant clinic or bridge is not going to feed their children. But counternarcotics experts and government officials respond that the opium ban is necessary.

"These poor farmers are going to get stepped on and get hurt in this effort," says former Drug Enforcement Agency official Doug Wankel, who organized the U.S. counternarcotics effort here in 2003. "But it's a pain that has to be endured for the good of the masses."

"In the U.S. and the U.K., when people do an illegal activity, the police stops them, right? This is an illegal act, so we need to stop it in order to enforce the rule of law," says Zalmay Afzali, a spokesman for the Ministry of Counternarcotics. He also notes the link to the insurgency: "I try to explain to the farmer that cultivates poppy that he is buying a coffin for his child."

Yet the poverty created by getting rid of opium may be stoking terrorism. Nangahar — which became poppy free last year and is held up as an example of government control — has seen a rapid increase in extremism, according to a field study by David Mansfield, counternarcotics consultant for the U.N. and the World Bank.

By April last year, the province rescinded agreements to limit the movement of anti-government groups on its border with Pakistan. By July, these groups were believed to have set up bases in four districts next to Pakistan. By September, they were attacking government buildings. And by October, there were Taliban checkpoints.

Also, the crackdown in the country's far north is unlikely to stop the flow of opium and money to the Taliban in the south. In Zabul — the home province of Taliban spiritual chief Mullah Omar — poppy production grew by 45 percent last year.

Helmand province, a Taliban stronghold, grew so much opium last year that if it was a separate country, it would rank as the world's top opium producer, according to Gretchen Peters, author of "Seeds of Terror," on how the Taliban is bankrolling itself through drug smuggling. Peters says the Taliban's video messages now talk about securing smuggling routes and protecting poppy plantations.

Poppy fields in Taliban areas are so dangerous that eradication teams comb them for bombs before trying to destroy them. Last year 78 government agents were killed trying to destroy fields in the south. By contrast, the worst they faced in Badakshan was crying farmers.

Zainuddin, the head security officer for Darayim district in Badakshan, says he feels awful every time he uproots a poppy field.

"Sometimes I cry as I am hitting the poppies," says Zainuddin, who like many Afghans goes by a single name. "Because I know these are poor people and I am taking away the only thing they have."

Over the past month, dozens of fields have been destroyed in the mountains of Badakshan. Nasrullah, a 35-year-old farmer, planted three small plots of white-and-violet poppies inside a hill of wheat, hoping the taller crop would hide the illegal blossoms.

He stood in silence on a recent morning as nine police officers crossed a small gulch and climbed the hill. They assaulted his crop, hitting the flowers with long sticks until they fell to the ground. He put his face in his hands.

"I didn't plant this for my own pleasure," he says. "I planted this so that my family could eat. All the rest of this is worth nothing," he says, waving at the wheat. "The choice I have to make now is either kill myself. Or leave the country."

August 16 AP A3

Seven dead in bombing

A suicide car bomber struck near the front gate of NATO headquarters in Kabul on Saturday, killing seven people and wounding nearly 100 in a brazen daylight attack less than a week before Afghanistan's landmark presidential election.

Also Saturday, U.S. Marines pushed deeper into the strategic Helmand province town of Dahaneh for a fourth straight day, meeting fierce Taliban resistance as surface-to-surface missiles and Harrier fighter jets pounded insurgent positions in the surrounding hills.

The blast, which occurred about 8:35 a.m. in Kabul's heavily guarded diplomatic quarter, appeared aimed at frightening Afghans against participating in Thursday's presidential election and demonstrating that insurgents can strike whenever and wherever they want.

A Taliban spokesman claimed responsibility for the explosion, which rattled windows across a wide area of the Afghan capital and sent a huge, mushroom cloud of dense black smoke rising into the blue sky.

It was the biggest insurgent attack in Kabul in six months and shook public confidence in the extensive network of checkpoints and armed guards that maintain security in the city.

The bomber managed to evade several rings of Afghan police and detonated his vehicle about 30 yards (meters) from the main entrance to the NATO base, where top U.S. commander Gen. Stanley McChrystal has his headquarters. It was unknown whether McChrystal was there at the time of the attack.

After the blast, bloodied and dazed Afghans wandered the street. They included children who

congregate outside the NATO gate to sell gum to Westerners. Windows of nearby antique shops and diplomatic residences were shattered and blood smeared the ground.

President Hamid Karzai blamed the attack on the "enemies of Afghanistan" who were "trying to create fear among the people as we get close to the election," in which Karzai is favored to win a second, five-year term.

Karzai said in a statement that Afghans "are not afraid of any threats, and they will go to cast their votes."

Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid claimed responsibility and said the target was the NATO headquarters and the U.S. Embassy about 150 yards (meters) down the street. A top Kabul police official blamed al-Qaida because of the size of the blast.

Brig. Gen. E. Tremblay, the spokesman for the NATO-led force, said some soldiers in the International Security Assistance Force were wounded in the blast but did not say how many. Macedonia said three Macedonian soldiers who were guarding the gate were slightly injured.

Afghan security forces stopped the vehicle in front of NATO headquarters, then the bomber detonated the explosives, Tremblay said.

"The security measures in place have stopped cold the bombers as planned," he said, calling the latest attack an example of the "residual risk" that remained despite the safety measures taken. "It's very difficult to stop a suicide bomber."

The blast killed seven Afghans and wounded 91, Gen. Mohammad Zahir Azimi, the spokesman for the Afghan Ministry of Defense, said.

Among the wounded were four Afghan soldiers and Awa Alam Nuristani, a member of parliament and Karzai's campaign manager for women, the ministry said.

"I was drinking tea in our office when a big explosion happened," said Abdul Fahim, an Afghan in his mid-20s who suffered leg injuries. "I lay on the ground and then I saw wounded victims everywhere, including police and civilians."

The chief of Kabul's criminal investigation department, Abdul Ghafar Sayadzada, said 600 pounds (272 kilograms) of explosives were used, and that because of the amount he suspected al-Qaida was involved. The attacker passed three police checkpoints, Sayadzada said.

But Mujahid, the Taliban spokesman, said a suicide bomber named Ahmadullah from the Bagrami district of Kabul province carried out Saturday's attack.

It was the first major assault in Kabul since February, when eight Taliban militants struck three government buildings simultaneously in the heart of the city. At least 28 people, including eight assailants, were killed.

Interior Ministry spokesman Zemer Bashery said police were trying to figure out how the insurgents managed to carry out such an attack in one of the most tightly secured areas of the city.

"They must have used a new tactic to carry out this suicide attack," he said. "What kind of tactic we cannot say until the investigation is over."

Mujahid brushed aside talk of new tactics but said "we have peoples' support with us, the people are helping us to carry out our attacks."

"We have already announced that the people should not participate in the election," he said. "We have announced that the people should not participate in this American process. We are going to block the highways and roads leading to polling centers and attack those polling centers where we see Americans and other foreigners."

In Dahaneh, Marines launched a pre-dawn raid against a Taliban position on the southern edge of the town, storming a fortified compound and then blowing up two towers from which insurgents fired rockets and mortars at U.S. troops the day before.

Marines found marijuana plants growing in the courtyard and confiscated trigger plates used to manufacture roadside bombs.

U.S. troops launched an assault on Dahaneh early Wednesday, hoping to disrupt Taliban supply lines in the Now Zad valley and establish Afghan government control over an area held by the Taliban for years.

August 16 AP A6

In Afghanistan, opium addiction a family affair

Open the door to Islam Beg's house and the thick opium smoke rushes out into the cold mountain air, like steam from a bathhouse. It's just past 8 a.m. and the family of six - including a 1-year-old baby boy - is already curled up at the lip of the opium pipe.

Beg, 65, breathes in and exhales a cloud of smoke. He passes the pipe to his wife. She passes it to their daughter. The daughter blows the opium smoke into the baby's tiny mouth. The baby's eyes roll back into his head.

Their faces are gaunt. Their hair is matted. They smell.

In dozens of mountain hamlets in this remote corner of Afghanistan, opium addiction has become so entrenched that whole families - from toddlers to old men - are addicts. The addiction moves from house to house, infecting entire communities cut off from the rest of the world by glacial streams. From just one family years ago, at least half the people of Sarab, population 1,850, are now addicts.

Afghanistan supplies nearly all the world's opium, the raw ingredient used to make heroin, and while most of the deadly crop is exported, enough is left behind to create a vicious cycle of addiction. There are at least 200,000 opium and heroin addicts in Afghanistan - 50,000 more than in the much bigger, wealthier U.S., according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and a 2005 survey by the U.N. A new survey is expected to show even higher rates of addiction, a window into the human toll of Afghanistan's back-to-back wars and desperate poverty.

Unlike in the West, the close-knit nature of communities here makes addiction a family affair. Instead of passing from one rebellious teenager to another, the habit passes from mother to daughter, father to son. It's turning villages like this one into a landscape of human depredation.

Except for a few soiled mats, Beg's house is bare. He has pawned all his family's belongings to pay for drugs.

"I am ashamed of what I have become," says Beg, an unwashed turban curled on his head. "I've lost my self-respect. I've lost my values. I take the food from this child to pay for my opium," he says, pointing to his 5-year-old grandson, Mamadin. "He just stays hungry."

Beg's forefathers owned much of the land in the village, located beside a gushing stream at the end of a canyon of craggy mountains in Badakshan province, hundreds of miles (kilometers) northeast of Kabul, Afghanistan's capital.

He once had 1,200 sheep. He sold them off one by one to pay for drugs.

The land followed. He's turned his spacious home, once lined with ornamental carpets, into a mud shell. He grows potatoes in rows in the last of his fields and each time he harvests the crop, he has to make a choice - feed his grandchildren, or buy opium. He usually chooses drugs.

Basic necessities like soap long ago fell by the wayside.

"If we have 50 cents, we buy opium and we smoke it. We don't use the 50 cents to buy soap to clean our clothes," explains Raihan, Beg's daughter and the mother of the 1-year-old. The toddler wears a filthy shirt and no underwear. "I can be out of food, but not out of opium."

The country's few drug treatment centers are in cities far from villages like this one. And even those able to get themselves to the cities are often unable to get help. The drug clinic in Takhar province, the nearest to Sarab, has a waiting list of 2,000 people and only 30 beds.

So the villagers are drowning in opium. They begin taking it when they are sick, relying on its anesthetic properties - opium is also used to make morphine. Sarab, a village located at 8,000 feet (2,438 meters) and snowed in for up to three months a year, is a day's walk over mountain paths to the nearest hospital. The few shops in town do not even sell aspirin.

"Opium is our doctor," says Beg. "When your stomach hurts, you take a smoke. Then you take a little more. And a little more. And then, you're addicted. Once you're hooked, it's over. You're finished."

When his grandson Shamsuddin, 1, cut his finger in the door jamb, Beg blew opium smoke into the child's mouth, a common practice in this part of the world which is now resulting in rampant child addiction. He doesn't want his grandchild to become an addict, but he says he has no choice. "If there is no medicine here, what should we do? The only way to make him feel better is to give him opium."

From a single smoke, they progress to a three-times-a-day habit that spreads. When Beg began using opium, it wasn't just his wife and daughter who followed suit. It was his brother. Then his brother's wife. Like an epidemic, it makes its way across the village.

Health workers say that to treat the addiction, they need to treat the entire community. Last year, the Ministry of Health took 120 addicts from Sarab to a facility in a town one day's drive away to be treated. Three months later, they found that 115 of the 120 had relapsed.

"First my neighbor started doing opium again," explains Noor, one of the women treated, whose eyes are dark caves. "Then my cousin. Then my husband. And then after a while, I also started."

Most of the addicts spend \$3 to \$4 a day on opium in a part of the world where people earn on average \$2. They sell their land and go deeply into debt to maintain their habit.

"I used to be a rich man," says Dadar, a man who looks to be in his 70s and whose family of seven is addicted. "I had cattle. I had land. And then I started smoking. I sold the cattle. I sold my land. Now I have nothing."

He wears an old windbreaker encrusted with dirt. His wife pulls back her lips to show a mouth

full of diseased teeth. Their grandchildren have knotted hair and ripped clothes stained with muck.

Because they've sold their cattle, they no longer eat meat. When they sold the last of their land, they also lost their wheat, potatoes and greens. Their diet now consists of tea and the occasional piece of bread given by a neighbor.

Village chief Sahib Dad says even those who are not addicted are forced to pay a price.

"When a person gets addicted, he has nothing to eat," says Dad. "That affects his neighbor because the neighbor is forced to give over a part of his food. For this reason, all of us are poorer."

After selling their land, some families resort to even more desperate measures. They take loans from the shopkeepers who sell them drugs. Then they sell their daughters, known as 'opium brides,' to settle the debt. They lease their sons.

"I know he is angry with me. But what can I do? I have nothing left to sell," says Jan Begum, who has sent her 14-year-old to do construction work for the drug dealers. "I tried to stop, but I can't. Whenever I do, the pain becomes unbearable."

The problem is compounded by Afghanistan's neighbors. Iran immediately to the west has the world's highest per capita heroin use. The heroin labs there, as well as in Pakistan to the east, use opium imported from Afghanistan. These countries are now exporting heroin addiction back to Afghanistan in the form of returning refugees.

Like opium, heroin in Afghanistan is biting off whole families. Gul Pari, 13, watched her mother get high on heroin when she and her brother were in elementary school. Now she lies in a bed in a drug treatment center for women in Kabul. Her 15-year-old brother Zaihar is across town in a rehab facility for men.

Their bodies are like brittle sticks. The 13-year-old tries to push herself up on one elbow, but her thin arm cannot hold her up, so she falls back onto the pillow. Her emaciated brother leans against a wall to steady himself.

What will happen when they go home is unknown. They live with their mother - a recovering heroin addict - under a tarp in the yard of an abandoned house.

Mohammad Asef, a health worker at the clinic taking care of Zaihar Pari, says he is worried about the boy's chances of recovering. "In America people go and get high in the park. In Afghanistan, they do it in the home," says Asef. "They bring it inside. They burn it on the family stove. Everyone sees. So everyone is affected."

In Sarab, villagers who are not addicted keep their distance from those who are. They don't invite them into their homes. They discourage them from coming to village meetings. It's as if they are trying to quarantine themselves.

Beg says that for him all hope is lost. Even after he is buried, it'll take 70 years for the opium to ooze out of his bones. His hope, he says, are his grandkids - the only people in the family who are not yet addicts.

As Beg is getting high on a recent morning, the 1-year-old crawls over and starts playing with the opium pipe. He picks it up and shakes it, as if it were a rattle. Then, imitating his grandfather, he raises the pipe to his mouth.

Soldier 'wanted to serve'

Seeing a man wearing a U.S. Army dress uniform pull into their driveway, Donna Roush believed her son, Cpl. Nick Roush, pulled off a second surprise visit in a year.

Those hopes were quickly dashed when two men emerged, bearing word that had kept her largely sleepless at nights for two years: Roush, a 22-year-old special operations soldier, was killed in an explosion in Afghanistan.

"You trust in the Lord, but you're just so worried for your boy because there's nothing you can do," said Bob Roush, the soldier's father. "It's devastating.

"The only thing that lets you go on is that we are counting on seeing Nick in heaven."

The Thornapple-Kellogg High School graduate joined the Army after spending two years at Kalamazoo Valley Community College.

That's where he encountered a wounded special operations soldier who told Roush about life in the military and being part of a team focused on a mission.

The soldier told Roush how he felt his life was significant because of his duty, and how that drive and optimism disappeared when he could not return due to his injury.

It was a tale that moved Roush to be the best that he could be, his father said.

"He got his wheels moving and once that happens you can't stop him," Bob Roush said. "He never even let us talk to him about it. He wanted to serve. He wanted to do something significant.

"He has done that and more."

The former high school golfer who shared a love of cars with his father -- the pair stripped and rebuilt a beat up Eagle Talon into a prize-winning show vehicle -- turned himself into the finest physical specimen he could.

In basic and specialized training, Roush's goal was always to land with the elite class of the Army special operations team, his father said.

"He never did anything 50 percent. It was always 110 percent."

Still, there were times where Roush's passion was outweighed by stark reality. Several weeks ago, the last time Roush talked to his parents, the 22-year-old said he watched a member of his unit take a bullet to his leg.

"You could sense something," his father said.

"He said it was getting crazy, that it was getting hot there. We got nervous, but then he went back to his jovial self."

Roush deployed to Afghanistan on Easter Sunday, leaving from his parents' house.

Rarely could he tell them where he was or exactly what he was doing.

His death still remains somewhat of a mystery.

The U.S. Department of Defense on Monday reported Roush died from injuries suffered when an improvised explosive device detonated near his vehicle.

The family has yet to learn more, Bob Roush said.

"We don't know if anyone else in the unit was lost. We hope not."

The death has already sparked compassion in the Barry County community where Roush was raised with his brothers, Bobby and Kyle.

The couple's church, First Baptist Church of Middleville has surrounded them, and neighbors have reached out with love. Roush shared the deep faith of his family and was involved in the church.

While funeral arrangements are pending as Roush's body returns to the United States, Pastor Frank Snyder will work with and counsel the family through their pain.

"We'll do whatever is necessary," he said.

Tony Koski, the high school principal, knows Roush's death will have a profound impact on people.

Roush was a senior golfer during Koski's first year as the district's athletic director.

"Nick was a solid student, but more importantly he was a nice young man and a great citizen," Koski said.

"It's a big loss."

Across from the Roush home, Sara Lee has already felt the impact.

"What courage and what strength he had to know the danger and have the desire to go and help others," Lee said. "The family has made the ultimate sacrifice and it's a sobering reminder of the dangers of war."

"He's a hero to me."

August 20 GR Press A4

Soldier's remains return to area

The body of Cpl. Nick Roush, [a Middleville man killed in action](#) during U.S. Army service in Afghanistan, is slated to arrive at the Gerald R. Ford International Airport around 4 p.m. Friday.

After a private family ceremony at the airport, those who wish to pay their respects are encouraged to line the road as the Caledonia and Middleville fire departments escort Roush's casket along M-37 to the First Baptist Church in Middleville.

The 22-year-old's family will welcome visitors at the church from 5 to 8 p.m. Sunday and on Monday from noon to 2 p.m. and 5 to 8 p.m. The church, at 5215 N. M-37, also is the location of Tuesday's 11 a.m. funeral. A military burial will follow at Mt. Hope Cemetery.

The special operations serviceman was killed Sunday when an improvised explosive device detonated near his vehicle.

Roush, a Thornapple Kellogg High School graduate, joined the Army two and a half years ago, and deployed to Afghanistan on Easter Sunday.

The former high school golfer was assigned to the 1st Psychological Operations Battalion, 4th Psychological Operations Group at Fort Bragg, N.C.

August 21 GR Press A1

'Welcome home, fallen hero'

A weeping Donna Roush welcomed her middle son, U.S. Army Cpl. Nick Roush, home Friday, meeting his flag-draped casket, bending over and embracing it.

Supported by family members, the proud mother of a fallen soldier stepped away as a U.S. Army Reserve National Guard honor guard carried the late 22-year-old to an awaiting hearse through a light mist.

Another 100 members of the First Baptist Church of Middleville, many with tears streaming down their cheeks, watched through a chain-link fence at the Northern Air Inc. grounds at Gerald R. Ford International Airport.

They wanted one glimpse of the man who sacrificed his life in battle in Afghanistan on Sunday before celebrating his life during visitation and memorial services next week.

Roush's body arrived at the airport about 4:10 p.m. and made a somber trek to the Middleville church where Roush worshipped since he was a child.

Flanked by 50 Patriot Guard of Michigan motorcycle riders on either side of Roush's body, the family was escorted for a 12-mile ride lasting about 40 minutes, slowed by thick crowds along most of the route.

Whether passing industrial parks, strip retail centers, homes or rolling farmland, the family and the motorcade were greeted by flags, signs and people paying their respects, with hand on heart or saluting.

"God bless you, Nick," read a banner held by workers outside Baudville, Inc., 5380 52nd St. SE in Cascade Township.

"Welcome home, fallen hero," read another, held in front of Bileth Services Inc., 6871 Kraft Ave. SE in Caledonia Township.

A Steelcase Inc. semi-truck supported a massive American flag.

The procession slowed as it approached the church, where a fire truck's ladder extended high over the M-37, holding aloft a large U.S. flag. A yellow ribbon was wrapped around every tree, and the church's message board read, "For freedom, we say goodbye -- for now. Nick Roush."

Inside, Roush's military escort, with him when he was killed, shared with the family details about what happened Sunday when an improvised explosive device detonated near his vehicle in Herat, Afghanistan. He was deployed with the Army's First Psychological Operations Battalion, Fourth Psychological Operations Group from Fort Bragg, N.C.

A Thornapple Kellogg High School graduate, Roush had joined the Army in 2006 after hearing about a soldier's experience in an elite special operations unit.

He wanted to serve his country and put all of his effort to into qualifying for the select division, said his father, Bob Roush.

Donna Roush put together a prayer board that hangs near the church's main entrance, displaying photos of all the congregation's service men and women and Nick Roush's favorite Holy Bible verse, Isaiah 6:8, said Iva Patterson, a family friend.

Patterson's son, Christian, 22, who recently joined the Army National Guard, was close to Nick Roush, graduating in the same class and taking part in church youth group activities with him.

"When I came to church here in fifth or sixth grade, Nicky and I met and became instant friends,"

Christian Patterson said. "He had more drive than any one else I know."

Hundreds of people remained in front of the church after the family arrived, hugging and talking softly, some still carrying flags and signs.

"It's pretty intense," Patterson said of the turnout. "The support is amazing, it really is. Not only coming from a friend, but as a fellow soldier.

"In the news, you don't always hear about all the people who are praying for us. But here they are."

Tom Plaska, 49, of Grand Rapids, a ride captain for the Patriot Guard of Michigan, helped organize the procession. Commander of Rockford American Legion Post No. 102, he said veterans participate at the family's request and come from across the state.

"Most of the riders do this out of patriotism and to honor the fallen," he said.

Lynn Potter, 47, and her husband Rick Potter, 51, of Zeeland, were among the riders. Their son is serving in the U.S. Marine Corps.

"I was having a hard time driving with the tears," Lynn Potter said.

"Sometimes you lose faith in mankind a little, you know? But then you have something like this, with all these people showing their support."

Funeral services for Roush are 11 a.m. Tuesday at the church, 5215 N. M-37, with a military burial following at Mount Hope Cemetery on Main Street in Middleville. Visitation is 5 to 8 p.m. Sunday and noon to 2 p.m. and 5 to 8 p.m. Monday at the church.

August 23 New York Times A9

Female soldiers live, love, fight alongside men in war zones

There is no mistaking that this dusty, gravel-strewn camp northeast of Baghdad is anything other than a combat outpost in a still-hostile land. And there is no mistaking that women in uniform have had a transformative effect on it.

They have their own quarters, boxy trailers called [CHUs](#) (the military's acronym for containerized housing units, pronounced "chews").

There are women's bathrooms and showers, alongside the men's. Married couples live together. The base's clinic treats gynecological problems and has, alongside the equipment needed to treat the trauma of modern warfare, an ultrasound machine.

Opponents of integrating women in combat zones long feared that sex would mean the end of American military prowess. But now birth control is available — the PX at Warhorse even sold out of condoms one day recently — reflecting a widely accepted reality that soldiers have sex at outposts across Iraq.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are the first in which tens of thousands of American military women have lived, worked and fought with men for prolonged periods. Wars without front lines, they have done more than just muddle the rules meant to keep women out of direct enemy contact.

They have changed the way the United States military goes to war. They have reshaped life on bases across Iraq and Afghanistan. They have cultivated a new generation of women with a warrior's ethos — and combat experience — that for millennia was almost exclusively the preserve of men.

And they have done so without the disruption of discipline and unit cohesion that some feared would unfold at places like Warhorse.

“There was a lot of debate over where women should be,” said Brig. Gen. Heidi V. Brown, one of the two highest ranking women in Iraq today, recalling the start of the war. “Here we are six years later, and you don’t hear about it. You shouldn’t hear about it.”

In many ways, General Brown’s career trajectory since the war began reflects the expanded role for women at war.

In 2003, as a colonel, she commanded a Patriot air-defense brigade that joined the push from Kuwait to Baghdad, losing nine soldiers in a maintenance battalion outside Nasiriya three days after the invasion began. One of them, Pfc. Lori Ann Piestewa, was the first woman killed in action in Iraq; Pfc. [Jessica D. Lynch](#) was captured in the same attack. Now, as the American role in the war declines, General Brown will oversee the logistics of withdrawing the vast amounts of military hardware in Iraq over the next year.

“We’ve needed — needed — the contributions of both our men and women,” said Brig. Gen. Mary A. Legere, the director of intelligence for the American war effort here and the other highest ranking woman in Iraq.

The military, of course, is not gender blind, especially in a war zone.

Sexual harassment in a still-predominantly male institution remains a problem. So does sexual assault. Both are underreported, soldiers and officers here say, because the rigidity of the military chain of command can make accusations uncomfortable and even risky for victims living in close quarters with the men they accuse.

As a precaution, women are advised to travel in pairs, particularly in smaller bases populated with Iraqi troops and civilians. Capt. Margaret D. Taafe-McMenamy, commander of the intelligence analysis cell at Warhorse, carries a folding knife and a heavy, ridged flashlight — a Christmas gift from her husband, whom she lives with here — as a precaution when she is out at night on the base.

Staff Sgt. Patricia F. Bradford, 27, a psychological operations soldier, said that slights, subtle and not, were common, and some were easier to brush off than others. Women are still viewed derisively at times in the confined, occasionally tense space of an outpost like Warhorse.

“You’re a bitch, a slut or a dyke — or you’re married, but even if you’re married, you’re still probably one of the three,” Sergeant Bradford said.

At the same time, she and other female soldiers cope with the slights, showing a disarming brashness.

“I think being a staff sergeant — and a bitch — helps deflect those things,” she added.

The issues that arise in having women in combat — harassment, bias, hardship, even sexual relations — are, she and others said, a matter of discipline, maturity and professionalism rather than an argument for separating the sexes.

Sergeant Bradford recalled the day during her first tour when her convoy moved south while

a soldier with whom she was then engaged to be married moved north on the same highway. She listened on the radio as his convoy came under an attack that continued after she was out of range.

“For four days, I had no idea what happened to him,” she said, “but I still had to continue my mission, because that’s what you do when you’re a soldier.” (He emerged unscathed, she later learned.)

Unforeseen Issues

Such issues were not foreseen when the war in Iraq began in 2003, even though the initial invasion force [included women in the vanguard](#).

On a practical level, the military was not prepared to house and otherwise address the specific needs of women in a war zone — including issues like health and privacy.

Early on, bases were largely makeshift and far more dangerous. Few soldiers, male or female, had more than rudimentary quarters or latrines. None had much privacy.

Sgt. Dawn M. Cloukey, a communications specialist, spent her first tour in Iraq in 2005 and 2006 as the only woman among 45 soldiers, operating a retransmission station in the mountains of northern Iraq and then in the center of Baghdad. She lived out of a rucksack, with no toilet or room of her own. She described the experience as isolating.

“I always felt like the plague,” she said at Warhorse, on her second tour in Iraq, where she handles communications for the commander of the First Stryker Brigade of the 25th Infantry Division.

As the United States military settled into more permanent bases, many initial difficulties abated, as the [Army](#) gradually adapted to the new reality of waging war with a mixed force. So have the soldiers themselves.

Women have sought acceptance in a still-predominately male environment not by emphasizing their sex but rather by displaying their toughness, their willingness to adjust to conditions that are less than ideal.

“I’ve kicked my guys out of the truck to pee in a bottle like that,” Sgt. Joeline M. Lachance, a soldier with the 172nd Military Intelligence Battalion, said at Warhorse, pointing to one of the liter water bottles that are ubiquitous at bases in Iraq. “Cut the bottle off and pee in the bottle and then dispose of it. Sometimes it’s an issue, but most of the time, I just make do.

“I don’t try to, like, ‘I can’t sleep here,’ ” she continued. “If they’re sleeping there, I’m sleeping there. I spent five days out in the truck once — with six of my guys, sleeping on the floor.”

Warhorse still reverberates with the rumble of armored convoys and the thud of helicopters ferrying troops and, at times, the wounded. It is just north of Baquba, the regional capital of Diyala Province, one of the most restive provinces in Iraq. Here, the war is not over. Warhorse will very likely be among the last bases to close in Iraq before American troops withdraw in full.

At the outset of the war, the introduction of women into outposts like Warhorse raised fears not just of abuse or harassment, but also of sex and pregnancy. The worst of those fears, officers say, have not materialized.

In fact, sex in America's war zones is fairly common, soldiers say, and has not generally proved disruptive.

In April, the latest iteration of General Order No. 1, the rules governing the behavior of soldiers in Iraq broadly, quietly relaxed the explicit prohibition on sex in a war zone, though it still bars sex with Iraqis and spending the night in someone else's CHU. Some commands, including Baghdad, retain broader restrictions, for example, on being in CHUs belonging to members of the opposite sex.

"The chain of command already has to deal with enough," Captain Taafe-McMenamy said. "They don't really want to have to punish soldiers for dating."

Women do become pregnant — a condition that, intentional or not, in or out of wedlock, requires the woman to be flown out within two weeks, causing personnel disruptions in individual units.

The Army and Marine Corps declined to say exactly how many women left Iraq and Afghanistan as a result of pregnancies, but it appears to be relatively rare and has had little effect on overall readiness, commanders say. At Warhorse, the First Stryker Brigade, which has thousands of soldiers, has sent only three women home because of pregnancies in 10 months in Iraq, the brigade said.

"There was a fear if we integrate units, you will have a bunch of young people with raging hormones, and it will end up in too many unwanted pregnancies, and it's more trouble than it's worth," said Peter Mansoor, a former battalion commander in Iraq who, until retiring recently, served as Gen. [David H. Petraeus](#)'s executive officer. "With good leadership and mentorship, we have been able to keep those problems to a minimum."

Taking On New Roles

Roughly 1 in 20 of the 5,600 soldiers at Warhorse is female, a smaller ratio than in the military as a whole. Nonetheless, they are fully integrated in the base's operations.

Many of the women at Warhorse serve in jobs that have traditionally accommodated women: the base hospital, food service, supply and administration.

Others, though, serve on the brigade staff, in intelligence and psychological operations, which until recently were part of the Special Forces and thus off limits to women.

"We have changed so much," Col. Burt K. Thompson, the commander at Warhorse, said of the Army, noting that every time he leaves the base, his patrol includes two women, including Sergeant Cloukey "on comms" — communications — and a medic, Sgt. Evette T. Lee-Stewart. "To have a female on an infantry brigade staff? Oh my God."

Like many commanders who have served in Iraq or Afghanistan, he said that women have ended the debate over their role by their performance.

“I’ve relieved males from command,” he said. “I’ve never relieved a female commander in two and a half years as commander.”

The nature of the war has also done much to change the debate over combat roles. Any trip off the heavily secured bases now effectively invites contact with the enemy.

Many women have also been pulled off their regular jobs and trained to search Iraqi women at checkpoints because of local cultural sensitivities, putting them as much at risk as any male counterpart.

When Specialist Jennifer M. Hoepfner goes “outside the wire” at Warhorse, as going on patrol is known, she clambers into what she calls “the best seat in the truck,” the turret atop the Army’s newest armored vehicle, the MRAP.

“I’m the gunner on all our missions,” she said, having qualified for the M240B machine gun at an expert level.

“I think some of the males are a little confused when I go up,” Specialist Hoepfner said. “They’re like, ‘Who’s your gunner?’ ”

Women are also increasingly “attached” to infantry and armored units that train and advise Iraq’s police and military forces. Now that almost all American combat forces have pulled back to bases outside of Iraq’s cities, that training has become the main mission in Iraq.

The involvement of women in it has been a cultural shock for Iraqi men far less accustomed to dealing with women professionally, especially in the military.

Women spoke of inappropriate comments or uncomfortable flattery, and even gifts. “It was everything from candy to lingerie,” said Capt. Victoria Ferreira, 29, who spent a year with an 11-person squad training Iraqi officers. “How do you react to that? “Thank you?” ”

For the most part, though, Iraqis seem to accept the role of women in the American military — they have even expanded their own ranks for tasks like searching women at checkpoints — even if it seems unlikely that women will be incorporated more widely into the Iraqi armed forces anytime soon.

“I think now, six years since the war started, they’ve learned to adapt or tolerate the fact that in the American Army we have high ranking positions that are filled by women,” said Capt. Violeta Z. Sifuentes, who commands the 591st Military Police Company.

It was not always so, she recalled of her first tour in Samarra in 2006. “They always thought my platoon sergeant or my squad leader was the one in charge until I was like, ‘Listen here. I’m in charge whether you like it or not.’ ”

The captain’s remarks were typical. The women serving in today’s military represent a generational shift. They are confident young women who have not had to fight the same gender battles their predecessors in uniform did.

“I never felt like I had to fight to succeed in the Army” was how Captain Taafe-McMenamy, who is 27, put it.

Adapting to the Tasks

Women in today's military say they do not feel the same pressure to prove themselves. They adapt and expect others to adapt. They preserve their femininity without making much of it.

Specialist Hoepfner and her roommate, Sergeant Bradford, belong to the 361st Tactical Psychological Operations Company, which patrols the towns and villages of Diyala with infantry squads to spread and collect information.

On a recent patrol in the small village of Shifta, they seemed more of a novelty to the Iraqis they encountered than the soldiers they patrolled with, taking up defensive positions alongside their male colleagues whenever they paused.

"I actually had this million-dollar idea my first deployment," Sergeant Bradford said of her tour as a truck driver hauling supplies in 2004. "I was like, I need something that's like a beer bong that I can hold in place so I can pee standing up without pulling my pants down. Cause we were truck drivers. We'd stop on the side of the road. There's no bushes. I was telling one of my soldiers about this great idea, and he said they already make that."

She produced from her bunk in her CHU a device sold by REI called a "[feminine urinary director](#)." "It's even pink," Specialist Hoepfner interjected.

Warhorse's supply officer — a woman — acquired dozens of them.

"The first time one of them came around a truck and saw me peeing on a tire," she said of one of her male colleagues, "I thought he was going to have a heart attack."

August 23 Los Angeles Times A14

Afghans moving to curb use of private gunmen

Mirza Mohammed Dost stood at the foot of his son's grave, near a headstone that read, "Raheb Dost, martyred by Americans."

His son was no insurgent, Dost said. He was walking home from prayers on the night of May 5 when he was shot and killed on a busy Kabul street by U.S. security contractors.

"The Americans must answer for my son's death," Dost said as a large crowd of young men murmured in approval.

The shooting deaths of Raheb Dost, 24, and another Afghan civilian by four gunmen with the company once known as Blackwater have turned an entire neighborhood against the U.S. presence here.

Already enraged by the deaths of civilians in U.S. military airstrikes, many Afghans are also demanding more accountability from security contractors who routinely block traffic and bark orders to motorists and pedestrians.

As the war escalates in Afghanistan and the U.S. seeks to win over a wary public, incidents such as the one that left Raheb Dost dead raise uneasy ghosts of the Iraq war. With more than 70,000 security contractors or guards in Afghanistan and billions of dollars at stake in lucrative government contracts, the consequences of misconduct are significant.

A June report by the Commission on Wartime Contracting in Iraq and Afghanistan cites serious deficiencies among private security companies in Afghanistan in training, performance, accountability and effective use-of-force rules.

The report says U.S. authorities in Afghanistan have not applied "lessons learned" in Iraq after a 2007 incident in which Blackwater guards shot and killed 17 Iraqi civilians in Baghdad. Iraq revoked the firm's license, and five contractors face U.S. federal manslaughter and weapons charges.

The Afghan Interior Ministry has stepped up licensing of security contractors and is demanding stricter monitoring. The ministry says it wants limits on the number of contractors here, even as the Pentagon considers hiring a private security firm to provide more guards for its military bases.

Members of parliament, responding to complaints from constituents, have proposed legislation cracking down on contractors.

"They have caused some serious difficulties for the people," said Fazlullah Mujadedi, a member of a parliamentary commission looking into security companies.

The extent of those difficulties is hard to gauge: The United Nations office in Kabul, the capital, didn't break out contractor involvement in its recent report on deaths or injuries of civilians, and other agencies here don't track such incidents.

In June, Afghan President Hamid Karzai accused Afghan guards working for U.S. forces of killing a police chief and four police officers in the southern city of Kandahar. The U.S. military called it an "Afghan on Afghan incident" and said no U.S. forces were involved.

Such incidents have fed a sense among some Afghans that private gunmen are above the law -- both Afghan and American. Security contractors are subject to Afghan laws, but the four contractors in the May shooting left for the U.S. before Afghan authorities could mount a case against them.

Since February, oversight of security contractors in Afghanistan has been entrusted not to Congress or the Pentagon, but to a British-owned private contractor, Aegis. The company was hired by the American government after the U.S. military said it lacked the manpower and expertise to monitor security contractors. Aegis is supposed to help U.S. authorities make sure contractors are properly trained, armed and supervised.

The wartime contracting commission, set up by the U.S. last year, expressed concern over "limited U.S. government supervision" of private security contractors in Afghanistan. Many are unlicensed and unregulated, said Zemaray Bashary, an Interior Ministry official.

Anger toward hired gunmen runs especially high in Yaka Toot, a densely packed neighborhood in east Kabul, where residents are still simmering over the May shooting.

Residents say the U.S. contractors opened fire without provocation after one of their vehicles tipped over in a traffic accident. Killed along with Dost was Romal, 22, a passenger in a Toyota sedan on his way home from work. Like many Afghans, Romal used just one name. Mohammed Shafi, a neighborhood elder who said he ran to the shooting scene that night, said the Toyota driver told him that the Americans ordered him to stop, then told him to move on. When the driver began pulling away, Shafi said, the Americans started shooting.

Dost, who was walking about 200 yards away, was shot in the head. No weapons were found in the Toyota, or on Dost, according to an Afghan police investigator.

"Some Americans think all Afghans are terrorists or insurgents," Shafi said. "But if they keep

killing civilians, I'm sure some Afghans will decide to become insurgents." Daniel J. Callahan, a Santa Ana lawyer representing the four contractors, said the men fired in self-defense after one car rammed one of the contractors' two SUVs, forcing it into a ditch, and a second car tried to run down two contractors.

Callahan accused Blackwater, now called Xe, of "trying to make them scapegoats to take the heat off Blackwater." He said the company falsely accused the men of drinking alcohol that night.

In fact, Callahan said, Xe supervisors issued the four men automatic rifles and told them to escort Afghan interpreters home that night. He said military investigators found no evidence the men had consumed alcohol.

A U.S. military spokesman in Kabul said in May that the four contractors, who trained Afghan security forces, were authorized to handle weapons only when conducting training. At the time of the 9 p.m. incident, he said, they were not permitted to have weapons.

Xe has said that the four men were fired for not following terms of their contract. An Xe spokeswoman, Stacy Capace, did not return phone calls and e-mails seeking comment.

A U.S. Justice Department spokeswoman declined to say whether the contractors are under criminal investigation in the United States. Callahan said the Justice Department has told him it is conducting an investigation. Callahan, who called the contractors "four good Americans," identified them as Chris Drotleff, Steve McClain, Justin Cannon and Armando Hamid.

The Interior Ministry has licensed 39 security companies employing 23,000 people who are assigned 17,000 weapons. More than 19,000 of the employees are Afghans.

The U.S. military employs 4,373 private security contractors, according to the wartime contracting commission. More than 4,000 are Afghans, many of them former militia fighters who help guard U.S. and coalition bases.

The State Department employs 689 security contractors, most for U.S. Embassy security. American employees traveling in certain areas are protected by Xe contractors supervised by State Department security agents.

The U.S. spent between \$6 billion and \$10 billion on security contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2003 through 2007 alone, according to Congress.

In all, there are more than 71,000 security contractors or guards, armed and unarmed, in Afghanistan, said P.W. Singer, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who has written extensively on the subject.

Private security convoys are a common sight on Kabul's traffic-clogged streets. Some race past in SUVs with tinted windows, sealing off traffic lanes and forcing motorists to the curb.

Many businesses hire uniformed guards armed with assault rifles. Kabul restaurants that cater to Westerners employ armed, uniformed guards who operate security gates and metal detectors.

The U.S. Embassy in Kabul, citing poor performance, fired its private security contractor, MVM, in 2007 and hired another American-owned company, ArmorGroup North America.

If U.S. or Afghan authorities don't properly monitor companies such as Xe, those firms should

answer in person to the families of civilians killed or wounded by contractors, said Raheb Dost's aunt, who goes by one name, Friba. "We want to confront them and ask them: Why do you think you're allowed to do such a terrible thing?" Friba said, standing over her nephew's grave.

Mirza Dost, the dead man's father, said he was summoned to a police station in May to meet U.S. Embassy officials and Americans who told him they represented Xe. He said the Americans apologized and agreed to pay hospital bills for his son, who was in a coma but later died after 31 days in the hospital.

After his son's death, Dost said, he was paid "a good sum of money"; he declined to elaborate. Shafi, the neighborhood elder, said the family of the other man who was killed was also paid.

Dost, who lost a leg to a land mine fighting the Soviet army in 1989, said his son was the family's sole wage earner. He said he considered Xe's payment fair compensation but was offended that neither the embassy nor Xe paid a condolence call after his son died. "That's our culture, but the Americans don't know our culture," he said.

Dost said he does not blame all Americans, but he is wary of any American contractors or U.S. forces he encounters on the street. "They need to be more careful and show more respect for Afghan people," he said.

Security contractors sign contracts making them liable for prosecution for violating Afghan laws. But Dost does not insist that the Xe contractors be tried in Afghanistan. Nor does his neighbor Shafi, the community elder. "It wouldn't make me happy to see them face Afghan justice," Shafi said as young men from the neighborhood leaned across Dost's grave to hear his pronouncement. "What would make me happy," Shafi said, "is to never have another innocent person killed."

August 24 New York Times A2

Commanders say Afghanistan force insufficient

American military commanders with the [NATO](#) mission in Afghanistan told [President Obama's](#) chief envoy to the region this weekend that they did not have enough troops to do their job, pushed past their limit by [Taliban](#) rebels who operate across borders.

The commanders emphasized problems in southern Afghanistan, where Taliban insurgents continue to bombard towns and villages with rockets despite a new influx of American troops, and in eastern Afghanistan, where the father-and-son-led Haqqani network of militants has become the main source of attacks against American troops and their Afghan allies.

The possibility that more troops will be needed in Afghanistan presents the Obama administration with another problem in dealing with a nearly eight-year war that has lost popularity at home, compounded by new questions over the credibility of the Afghan government, which has just held an as-yet inconclusive presidential election beset by complaints of fraud.

The assessments come as the top American commander in the country, Gen. [Stanley A. McChrystal](#), has been working to complete a major war strategy review, and as the chairman of the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#), Adm. [Mike Mullen](#), described a worsening situation in Afghanistan despite the recent addition of 17,000 American troops ordered by the Obama administration and the extra security efforts surrounding the presidential election.

"I think it is serious and it is deteriorating," Admiral Mullen said Sunday on CNN's "State of the Union" program. "The Taliban insurgency has gotten better, more sophisticated, in their tactics." He added that General McChrystal was still completing his review and had not yet requested additional troops on top of the those added by Mr. Obama.

The American commanders in Afghanistan spoke this weekend with [Richard C. Holbrooke](#), Mr. Obama's special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Over the past two days, Mr. Holbrooke visited all four regional command centers in Afghanistan, and the message from all four followed similar lines: while the additional American troops, along with smaller increases from other NATO members, have had some benefit in the south, the numbers remain below what commanders need. The total number of American soldiers and [Marines](#) in Afghanistan is now about 57,000. It was unclear whether the commanders told Mr. Holbrooke exactly how many additional troops might be required.

Eastern Afghanistan, in particular, has been a trouble spot. On Sunday, during Mr. Holbrooke's stop at the Bagram military base, Maj. Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, commander of the United States and NATO forces in eastern Afghanistan, told him and visiting reporters that the Haqqani network was expanding its reach. "We've seen that expansion, and that's part of what we're fighting," he said. American commanders believe that the network, whose leaders [Jalaluddin Haqqani](#) and his son Sirajuddin have been linked to [Al Qaeda](#), are using sanctuaries in Pakistan to launch attacks against American and Afghan forces.

The problems in Afghanistan have been aggravated by what the American commanders call the Pakistani military's limited response to the threat of militants based there. Although General Scaparrotti said that cooperation by Pakistan and the United States against the militants had improved recently, he stressed that it was important for the Pakistanis to keep up the pressure, particularly after the reported killing of the leader of the Pakistani Taliban, [Baitullah Mehsud](#).

That echoed concerns from Obama administration officials who worry that with the absence of Mr. Mehsud, who was the Pakistani government's enemy No. 1, the military would shift its emphasis away from the tribal areas where the Taliban and Al Qaeda operate. "They think it's 'game over,' " one senior administration official said. "It's more like, 'game over, next level.' "

The White House has been concerned about declining support for the war among the American public. After recent polls illustrating the decline, Admiral Mullen and [Karl W. Eikenberry](#), a retired general who is the ambassador to Afghanistan, went on Sunday talk shows to discuss the direction of the mission.

"I'm certainly aware of the criticality of support of the American people for this war and in fact, any war," Admiral Mullen said on [NBC's](#) "Meet the Press." "And so certainly the numbers are of concern. That said, the president's given me and the American military a mission, and that focuses on a new strategy, new leadership, and we're moving very much in that direction."

He said, "I believe we've got to start to turn this thing around from a security standpoint in the next 12 to 18 months."

Mr. Holbrooke visited regional command centers in Kandahar, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif and Bagram on Saturday and Sunday. Speaking to Afghan reporters at the NATO base in Mazar-i-Sharif, Mr. Holbrooke said that part of the new strategy would include reaching out to members of the Taliban who show a willingness to lay down their arms. Many Taliban

fighters, Mr. Holbrooke said, "fight because they're misguided, or because they want a job."

"Anyone who renounces Al Qaeda and comes back to work peacefully in the Afghan system," he continued, "will be welcome."

American lawmakers intensified their criticism of President [Hamid Karzai](#), saying his government had not done enough to crack down on corruption and the drug trade that fuels the insurgency. Senator [Robert P. Casey Jr.](#), Democrat of Pennsylvania, told reporters at a dinner on Sunday at the American Embassy in Kabul that he had told Mr. Karzai, "There's going to come a time when the patience of Americans will run out." Senator Sherrod Brown, Democrat of Ohio, who was also at the dinner, said: "Time is not running out next week, but they have to show results. It's the last chance."

Concerns about fraud in the election have brought more complaints to Afghan officials. Mr. Karzai's main challenger, [Abdullah Abdullah](#), told a news conference in Kabul on Sunday that the number of suspected irregularities had been "alarming."

Afghanistan's Election Complaints Commission said Sunday that it had made a priority of investigating 35 complaints, including allegations of ballot stuffing, voter intimidation and violence. The commission, jointly led by Western and Afghan officials, said it had received 225 complaints of irregularities.

August 24 Grand Rapids Press A1

Honoring a fallen friend

As the Marine convoy rumbled down a road near Herat, Afghanistan, Army Sgt. 1st Class Jason Montesanto heard the blast behind him. Then he heard small arms fire coming at them as he rushed to help the wounded.

He saw the armored Humvee of his teammate and friend, Cpl. Nick Roush, overturned two vehicles back.

Less than 24 hours later, Montesanto was on a plane for Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan. It was the first leg in an emotional journey to bring Roush, who stood with Montesanto at his wedding, back to his final resting place in Middleville.

The somber duty of Roush's military funeral escort was something Montesanto, of Reno, Nev., knew he must do for his friend.

"I'm not going to let anyone else take my guy home," he said as friends and family of Roush, 22, gathered Monday at First Baptist Church of Middleville for visitation.

Roush, who was expected to make sergeant's rank soon, was to be buried today during a ceremony with full military honors, including a fly-over by three Blackhawk helicopters. He died Aug. 16 in the blast, which also killed an interpreter riding in the Humvee Roush was driving. Four Marine passengers were also injured, two seriously.

Montesanto accompanied Roush's coffin to Qatar, then to Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany before an overseas flight to Dover Air Force Base and finally, Gerald R. Ford International Airport. Roush received full military honors at every stop.

During the last leg, Montesanto struggled with what to say to Roush's family and tried to put it down on paper. He wasn't sure what to expect at the airport.

"His mother came directly to me and gave me a hug," said Montesanto, who planned to speak at the funeral today.

Montesanto said the honor and respect shown to Roush has been overwhelming, particularly after they landed in Grand Rapids last Friday. The route from there to Middleville was thick with flag-waving supporters.

"To see pretty much the entire route lined with people, the flags and signs, everything was just amazing, beyond any expectation I had," he said.

Perhaps Montesanto's easiest job was describing Roush's bravery, intelligence and dedication. He and Roush were part of the Army's First Psychological Operations Battalion, Fourth Psychological Operations Group from Fort Bragg, N.C., and attached to a Marine unit.

Their job was to talk with local Afghanistan people, gather information and "find out how to make things better for them."

"Nick was a natural at it," Montesanto said. "We would go out to a village and he would just start talking to people. He really loved it."

Recently, part of their job was to have a presence so the Afghanistan people could vote in the Aug. 20 election with as little fear as possible. Some had been intimidated not to vote.

The situation had become more volatile in recent weeks. A Marine was injured when a bullet hit his leg in a vehicle's gun turret, and someone fired rocket-propelled grenades at their unit, but missed.

"Nick never flinched, never wavered," Montesanto said. "He knew what was happening and what the potential consequences were."

Roush, he said, wanted to be in the thick of things.

"He wanted to not just be a soldier, but a soldier who wanted to make a difference," Montesanto said. "I think where he felt he could make the most difference was in the fight."

As they talked about their friend, Montesanto and his wife, Gretchen, remembered his humorous ways, including his matter-of-fact way of saying "unbelievable" when somebody did something off-the-wall or unexpected.

He was one of the most physically fit soldiers in the Herat unit, always leading runs, and found ways to motivate others to exercise.

Montesanto, even though he helped place his friend's body in a coffin, isn't sure the loss has fully registered with him yet.

"I don't think the breadth of this is going to be known to me until I get back to Afghanistan," he said. "There is not going to be any replacing him."

August 26 Grand Rapids Press A3

Flag-draped farewell salutes fallen hero

Donna Roush laid her head on her son's casket, clutching the American flag soldiers had presented to her and sobbed.

The uncontrollable grief came as hundreds watched the final moments of [U.S. Army Cpl. Nick Roush's military funeral](#) Tuesday. The ceremony was permeated with moments of sorrow and sometimes humorous remembrances of the man friends and family affectionately knew as Nicky.

Three military helicopters flew over Mount Hope Cemetery as a soldier played "Taps" on a horn near Roush's flag-draped coffin, with six soldiers solemnly doing duty as pallbearers.

Donna Roush's emotions poured out again seconds after the burial service ended, and she said a final goodbye to her 22-year-old son. He died in Herat, Afghanistan, from injuries incurred by a roadside bomb while returning to his base on an early morning mission Aug. 16. Earlier Tuesday afternoon, one of Roush's brothers, his grandfather and his special operations teammate talked of his courage, faith and devotion to the military during a two-hour funeral service at First Baptist Church of Middleville. Roush was called a hero.

At least 700 people packed in for the service. Some clutched at tissues and sobbed at times. Roush's older brother, Bobby, choked up as he described the respect he has for his younger sibling.

"No longer (are you) a little brother, but now, to this older brother, an older brother looking up to his younger brother," he said, sniffing. "Thank you for being the man I hope to be some day."

Sgt. 1st Class Jason Montesanto, of Reno, Nev., talked of Roush as a "first-round draft pick" for soldiers, with his motivation and intelligence. Both were part of the Army's First Psychological Battalion, Fourth Psychological Operations Group from Fort Bragg, N.C., and attached to a U.S. Marine Corps unit.

"He was the guy I depended on the most when things had to get done," Montesanto said of Roush. "When we came under hostile fire, Nick was a lion."

"There is nothing more reassuring under fire knowing a guy like Nick has got your back."

Roush was a soldier willing to give it all, and "selflessly threw himself in harms way" for the mission, he said.

Roush's grandfather, Robert Roush Sr., talked about his grandson's strong faith in God and how he wanted to have matters "squared away" by getting baptized before going into the Army. The grandfather, a pastor, said it was a privilege to perform the service himself.

Roush's purpose was to serve and leave a legacy of making a difference, Robert Roush Sr. said. His grandson brought honor to God and his fellow Americans, he said.

Throughout the eulogy, friends and family talked about good times with Roush in younger years, including winter sledding, hours of making bicycle jumps, shooting hoops, hitting golf balls, ping-pong games in the driveway.

As a boy, for instance, there was the time his mother found a frog in his swim shorts. The 1995 Eagle Talon he and his father, Robert, fixed into a prize-winning show vehicle, dubbed "Monica," surfaced more than once during the service.

The 2005 Thornapple-Kellogg High School graduate had talked about teaching or opening a custom car shop, said Bobby Roush. But that wavering changed when he joined the Army. "From the time Nick signed, he was focused like I'd never seen," Bobby Roush said.

During the service, pastors read snippets of letters Roush wrote to his parents, describing how he missed them and home life, playing Xbox with his brother and how he shared his Christian faith with others.

Curt Batdorff, a friend and high school classmate, said Roush understood his military career choice was a life-altering.

"He was never confused as to what his battle was," Batdorff said. "It was to use his ability to fight for those that could not fight for themselves. He saw oppression and he didn't sit idly by."

Like on Friday, when Roush's body was transported to the church from Gerald R. Ford International Airport in Grand Rapids, hundreds of supporters Tuesday lined the funeral processional route. Many waved signs and flags as his hearse traveled to the cemetery with an escort of 95 Patriot Guard of Michigan riders, police cars and fire trucks.

At the cemetery, two fire trucks with U.S. flags attached to raised ladders formed an arch greeted the processional.

Tom Richards, who has lived across from Mount Hope Cemetery for 18 years, said Tuesday gathering of mourners was the largest he's seen. He had pulled lawn chairs to his driveway's end to watch and pay his respects.

"It's our first one in the village," Richards said of Roush's funeral. "What's just as sad is that it's been done (thousands) of times before across the country."

August 29 Grand Rapids Press C3

Former teacher co-founds Kabul Center

Five years ago, a woman from Afghanistan spoke at Elinor Miller's church about how children in the war-ravaged country are unable to get a basic education.

Since that day, Miller has spent her time and money to make a difference.

For decades, an estimated 60,000 children in Kabul have begged on the streets, trying to sell bottled water, bits of wood for heat and their artwork to support their families.

So Miller, a 1967 Ottawa Hills High School graduate, and a friend made their first trip to Afghanistan in 2003 to buy the children's artwork. They sell the paintings in the United States and send the proceeds to Kabul to help support a center that provides general, art and health education as well as vocational training.

Miller, who now lives in Montana, spoke about the Aschiana Center Monday at Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ.

The center provides basic education and hot lunches for children who cannot attend school because death or unemployment of a parent leaves them their family's main wage earners. It is especially tough for Afghan females, Miller said. The literacy rate among men there is 34 percent. But for women, it is 12 percent.

Miller, co-founder of Friends of Aschiana, said she has seen the center's impact.

Since it opened, the number of children in school has gone from 900,000 to 6.5 million in 2006 -- and almost a third are girls, Miller said.

During her most recent visit, Miller volunteered as an English teacher at the center after raising funds in the United States for the lunch program.

Miller said she and her husband, Beau, hope to return in December with as much as \$10,000 in school supplies for the center's locations.

Miller, a former substitute teacher and retired investment-fund manager, has used her retirement money to pay for her visits.

"I think this is what God wants me to do," she said.

Story Sources:

US Military – 16

US Defense Department – 1

US Envoy Richard Holbrooke - 1

NATO Secretary General - 1

Private Military Contractor - 1

Pakistan military – 2

Pakistani Police – 1

Pakistani truck driver – 1

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Pakistani businessman who was kidnapped – 1

Taliban official – 1

Afghani farmer – 1

Afghan President Karzai – 1

Afghani opium farmer – 2

Family of US soldier – 3

Middleville Community members – 8

Afghan civilian – 1

Afghan Parliament member – 1

Christian Mission worker - 1