

## FEATURES

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# Clearing Kandahar

Coalition forces are making progress in the battle to win hearts and minds in the Arghandab valley just outside Afghanistan's second city, the spiritual home of the Taliban

BY JON BOONE  
THE GUARDIAN, ARGHANDAB, AFGHANISTAN



A US army soldier receives flowers from an Afghan girl during a patrol in the Arghandab valley in Kandahar Province, in southern Afghanistan. PHOTOS: REUTERS

After three hours of lugging heavy gear around Arghandab, a lush valley flanking Afghanistan's second city of Kandahar, and with the sun about to set, the men of Bravo company were hungry. They were beginning to think about chow. But as they turned back to base, a suppressed groan went around the US soldiers, members of Task Force Fury of the 82nd Airborne Division, when a 13-year-old boy wandered up to the patrol and told an interpreter that he knew where a bomb was buried.

If his information were correct, then they would have to wait for the bomb squad to destroy the device, ruining their hopes for an evening meal back at Combat Outpost Ware, a tiny base set up in December in a radish field.

After trudging for a kilometer in the opposite direction, the platoon was led by the young informant to an unexploded bomb that could have lain undisturbed since the 1980s, when the Soviets fought for control of the area.

Nonetheless, the Americans said it was a significant moment that a local boy should be prepared to cooperate openly with foreign forces — a sign that they have started to win the support of local people.

In the last few months, they have discovered 69 homemade bombs, three-quarters of them from local tip-offs. Farmers have even dug out of their fields yellow, gallon-sized (27 liter) plastic tanks full of the explosives that have killed one member of Bravo company and cost another his leg.

All of this is on the northeast doorstep of Kandahar, the spiritual home of the Taliban, which will be the scene of intense US efforts to crush the rebels this summer. It will be the most significant struggle of the year, far more so than last month's effort to clear Marjah, the Helmand town seized by US and UK troops.

Optimists hope that by reining in the Taliban in the south's biggest city, the movement's leaders will start to believe the war is unwinnable and that they would be better off trying to come

to terms with the government through the "reconciliation" plan being pushed by the UK foreign secretary David Miliband.

Craig King, a Canadian brigadier general, said the effort would focus on key areas around the city, including Zhari, Panjwai, and Arghandab. It will be as much about improving the local government in those districts as simply getting rid of insurgents, he said. Unlike the last four years of overstretched Canadian efforts in Kandahar, there will be enough manpower to allow the mainly American force to "stay in areas where we clear" — an extra US brigade from the 101st Airborne Division will be arriving in early summer.

With its dense pomegranate orchards, that will look impregnable to eyes in the sky and thermal imaging technology when leaves start growing in the coming weeks, the part of the Arghandab where Bravo company operates could not be better suited to guerrilla warfare.

For the time being, the lush valley is quiet, because, the US says, of the textbook counterinsurgency techniques they have employed. These involved taking advantage of the winter low season, when many insurgents had returned to their sanctuaries in Pakistan, to swamp a relatively small area of around 10km<sup>2</sup> with troops.

Before their arrival, the area was looked after by a company of Strykers, a US Army outfit that operates in huge, eight-wheeled armored vehicles. Undermanned, they could not maintain a permanent presence, but relied instead on regular visits that led to battles with insurgents.

Unlike the Strykers, B Company goes almost everywhere on foot. Daily life at COP Ware consists of a succession of patrols, 24 hours a day.

The soldiers of B Company have become such a familiar sight in the village that the children have developed nicknames for some of the Americans: One soldier has to endure calls of "Chickybooboo" whenever he ventures out.

Strenuous efforts are made to integrate everything with the Afghan national army, which it is hoped will one day be capable of taking over responsibility for security. Unusually, both the army and the police have desks in the tactical operation center run by Major Joseph Brannon, the commanding officer for the area. It is a high-security room with screens beaming in live feeds from overhead drones.

Living with the Americans on

COP Ware is an ANA platoon, commanded by Sergeant Amanullah Rahmani, an impressive career soldier who leads a team of 18 well-drilled Afghans. He said local people respected him and his men because they are not from Kandahar but from provinces across the country, unlike the police, who, he said, are hated by the local people.

"They use heroin," he said. "They don't wear uniforms and they steal from the people. When they search houses, they open boxes containing women's clothes and touch the women."

It's a problem that NATO is working on, said King. There is a "focused district development" training program in the pipeline, an eight-week crash course for officers designed to ameliorate the worst excesses of the Afghan police.

Kevin Melton, one of a large team of US and Canadian civilians working with the army to make local government functional, is optimistic that this summer will be "far better" in Arghandab than in previous years.

He said there was fresh enthusiasm for local government because villagers now "accept that if they want to benefit from security they have to help with their own security."

Local people have started bringing around 10 disputes a day for arbitration to the district center, rather than using the Taliban's famously quick justice.

But Brannon said the US troops "haven't been properly tested yet," and success is still far from assured.

The number of roadside bombs is creeping up, he said, and an increase in insurgent radio traffic suggested the leadership was trying to reorganize the insurgency.

Apparently there is disgruntlement among the insurgent leadership that local fighters are refusing to engage the Americans when civilians are around.

"Night letters" have also been circulated — notes, usually delivered after dark, warning people on pain of death against co-operating with the Americans or working on their projects.

Last week a policeman from outside the province was found riddled with bullets on a road in the middle of the valley. US foot patrols have also recently found some villagers keeping their distance, avoiding opportunities to chat with the Americans, which suggests that the Taliban nearby are observing them.

The situation in Zhari and Panjwai is not nearly as rosy as in the Arghandab. The latter has seven of its 16 schools operating, but, Melton said, last week the last school in Panjwai was shut.

Even on the west side of the Arghandab river security is nowhere near as good as it is on the east.

Clearing out the other side of the valley will start on April 1, Brannon said.

"They know we are making a difference here, so we are expecting a pretty strong fight," the major said.

## Cuba launches new cigar for women

Habanos SA's slim line Julieta is designed, according to the marketing spiel, for 'the rhythms of today's sophisticated active women'

BY CARLOS BATISTA  
AFP, HAVANA

Gripped between the teeth of former Cuban president Fidel Castro, Winston Churchill, a Cuban peasant or a Western businessman, the cigar has long been a male preserve.

Now however Cuba hopes to woo the opposite sex with a new model for women, the "Julieta."

Short, slim and light in color, the Julieta is designed, its maker says, to be "enjoyed quickly, following the life rhythms of today's sophisticated active women."

The Cuban-Spanish company Habanos SA, which promotes all brands of handmade Cuban cigars — considered the finest in the world — launched the subtle-flavored Julieta at the 12th Havana cigar festival this month.

"It's a homage to women," says Habanos vice-president Javier Torres. At 12cm long and a slender 1.3cm wide, it's designed to be held by a

feminine hand.

Torres noted that women play a key role in making this new luxury product — 90 percent of the 300 workers at Havana's El Laguito factory are women — and said many already smoked cigars.

"I enjoy smoking very much. A woman does not lose her femininity just because she smokes, quite the opposite," says 60-year-old Miriam Obelin, clouds of smoke blurring her face as she puffs away.

For 14 years, Norma Fernandez made the long Cohiba Lanceros cigars so famously enjoyed by Castro, the father of the Cuban Revolution and former president.

When Castro, now 83, gave up smoking in 1986, Fernandez quit her job as a *torcedora*, or cigar-roller.

"I met him [Castro] two or three times. He told me I made good cigars," says the 57-year-old Fernandez who is now in charge of quality control for the world's most expensive cigar, the



Attendants present cigars at the closing dinner of the 12th Havana Cigar Fair. This year, the fair was focused on promoting cigar consumption among women. PHOTO: EPA

US\$500 Cohiba Behike.

These days women in Cuba do not just roll cigars, they are also playing a growing role in tobacco production. But in a Latin country known for its male chauvinism, cigar-smoking women — whether workers or businesswomen — are still sometimes looked down on by men.

"Women are beautiful. Smoking cigars does not go well with this," says 65-year-old builder Jose Torres.

Habanos SA clearly does not agree, with its new campaign to change attitudes and develop a market that has long been neglected. Currently only 10 percent of the world's cigar-lovers are women, according to industry sources.

While Cuban authorities routinely add warnings about the dangers of smoking on packets of cigarettes, this is not the case for cigars that are viewed in Havana as less damaging to the health. Under pressure from global

economic crisis, which led to a fall in tourism in Cuba, and with the trend in some Western countries banning smoking in bars and restaurants, sales of Cuban cigars fell last year by eight percent, or US\$360 million.

A trail of fragrant smoke drifts behind 22-year-old cigar-roller Yelena Vento.

"My boyfriend loves the smell of tobacco, he doesn't mind it at all. A woman who smokes is beautiful and elegant," she says.

Her colleague Adonis Velasco, 32, who says he "feels particularly good" when he sees a woman smoking a cigar, does not disagree.

For many in Cuba, where average wages are around US\$20 a month, being able to smoke a fine cigar, which can cost about US\$5, is not a matter of gender, but of money.

WARNING:  
Smoking can damage your health.