Indiana National Guard members earn 'peacekeeper' title

The eight heavily armed soldiers hiked along a rocky path in a valley rimmed by the snow-covered 16,000-foot peaks of the Hindu Kush -- a sharp contrast to the knot of boys scampering alongside. "What you doing?" a dark-eyed boy of perhaps 10 asked in halting English, one of more than a dozen youngsters chattering, giggling and inspecting the visitors. "Mines?"

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The Indiana National Guard patrol near the Afghan capital was making a routine visit to a community known as the Technical Academy Family Village, an enclave of about 150 families five miles east of Camp Phoenix, an American base.

But before the two-hour sojourn was over, one of the boys reported a possible mine to the soldiers, part of the Indiana National Guard's 1st Battalion, 151st Infantry, stationed in Afghanistan. They are among the more than 1,100 Indiana Guard troops who have been serving in the nation since July.

The report from the waif to the warriors was taken seriously, part of the day-to-day uncertainty of the U.S. military in a nation regarded as one of the most heavily mined in the world.

The boy's village, and the nearby barren field where he and his friends play, are just outside the walls of what is now called the Kabul Military Training Center. That is where the coalition of forces from the United States and elsewhere that make up Task Force Phoenix are training the new Afghan National Army.

Training Afghan forces is the primary mission of the American military here; in a broader sense, U.S. armed forces are trying to help stabilize the country by providing security and humanitarian work. And it's not difficult to find civilians and military Afghans who testify to the value of the military presence.

Maj. Gen. Mohammad Moeen and Mohammad Ghani see the benefits of American help from two different perspectives.

Moeen, 46, is commanding general of the Afghan army's 201st Corps, headquartered just east of Kabul. He has about 8,000 troops under him, all trained by coalition forces.

Ghani, 45, is the elder of the Family Village, where the National Guard routinely patrols.

Both men have developed cordial relationships with American soldiers.

"Actually, we were burning in a big fire, and these people rescued us from that," Moeen said of American troops. "We won't forget that."

Because of the military presence, Moeen said through interpreter Safiullah Manzoor, Afghanistan could hold the first free elections in the nation's history and can begin building its institutions.

Ghani, who is a kind of mayor for about 200 families who live in the enclave, gave voice to the optimism Moeen said is growing in Afghanistan because of the stability Afghans are feeling.

"It's going to be good," Ghani said through interpreter Ahmad Sohail. Afghan President Hamid Karzai "is going building government, and of course, you guys bring peace."


"Security is the absolute first thing you set up" to build or rebuild a country, Grube said. Without assurances of safety, there's little chance of success in building systems such as education, transportation, utilities and business, said the 42-year-old father of six from Highland Hills, Ind., near New Albany.

"So we're establishing the security structure for Afghanistan," he said. "And you do that through training Afghan soldiers."

That's also why soldiers are involved in humanitarian efforts, Grube said. The motivation is partly altruistic but also pragmatic.

"If the people in the area understand I'm here to help them," Grube said, "they're going to tell me when something's going on."

Capt. Jeff Hackett, an Indiana Guard soldier from Bowling Green, Ky., led his patrol through the village to build on that kind of relationship. The soldiers walk through, armed with rifles, on this day, but other days they bring backpacks and school supplies for the children.

In return, the villagers are more likely to let the soldiers know about troublesome behavior, from drug activity to unexploded ammunition.

During a recent patrol, Ghani invited Hackett into his home for chai tea and sweets. They sat on cushions arranged along three walls of the room, surrounding a room-size rug and facing a television hooked to a satellite dish that brought four channels into Ghani's home.

As they made small talk, Hackett's radio crackled. One soldier waiting outside reported that a boy reported a land mine in a nearby field. Earlier, the patrol had found a handful of old but unexploded large-caliber machine gun bullets.

Children have been playing in that field for months, making it unlikely an unexploded land mine had been overlooked, Hackett said. On the other hand, he noted, heavy rains in the past few months have caused long-buried mines left from the Soviet occupation of the 1980s to re-emerge.

The United Nations and other organizations consider the land-mine problem in Afghanistan to be one of the worst in the world. Military authorities say an old land mine caused the explosion late last month that killed four Indiana soldiers as they were scouting for a training area south of Kabul.

Hackett said the legacy of decades of mining is tragically visible.

"If you go downtown, you'll see little kids with no arms and no legs," he said.

The patrol went to investigate, approaching the suspicious object cautiously. The children had surrounded it with rocks to mark it for the soldiers. Upon inspection, it was deemed to be most likely an old fuse that probably was harmless but might still explode.

Cpl. Justin Craig, of New Albany, a 24-year-old, four-year member of the Guard, spray-painted the device and the rocks red; after a global-positioning device was used to pinpoint the location within 10 inches, the children were warned to leave the thing alone until a specially trained team could come to safely collect it.

That was one small example of the impact of the military here, but there are others. Grube said he regularly sees evidence of improvements since he and most of the Indiana National Guard soldiers arrived in Afghanistan in July.
Another example: a recent traffic interdiction conducted by Afghan military police with minimal assistance from American troops. Conducted in a mountain gorge east of Kabul in the early evening, the exercise was aimed at finding drugs, guns or other threatening contraband. The Afghan army found one car carrying an AK-47 assault rifle and a 9 mm handgun. As it turned out, the owner was a government official with valid permits for the weapons, but Grube said the Afghan troops fulfilled the mission of ensuring that was the case.

“When we first got here, they weren’t anywhere close to being able to do that,” he said. Months of training, however, yielded success.

“You win small battles,” Grube said. “And that is a perfect example of winning the battles.”


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