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Lockdown at the US Embassy in Kabul

by Paul Wolf

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A week ago Wednesday, May 21, 2003, US troops shot to death four Afghan soldiers in front of the US embassy in Kabul. The Afghans were being trained by the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) guarding the city, comprised of German, French, and others, located right across the street. The Afghan soldiers were in uniform and carrying weapons, and the US troops apparently mistook them for enemy combatants. For the next five days, angry Afghans held a protest in front of the US embassy, at the site of the killings.

By the time I arrived to photograph the five day old protest, which was yesterday, the entire block around the embassy had been closed off by the police, and the protest was no more. This was apparently due to fears that continued protests would provide an opportunity for someone to throw a grenade at the embassy, or provoke another shooting incident in some other way, which would obviously be a disaster.

I was allowed through the police lines, approached the embassy and took a few pictures at the entrance. (note US soldier simultaneously photographing me) Then when I tried to return a second time, I was prevented from entering the same block. I later learned that the area had been closed off to journalists since the shooting incident. The Afghan police must have thought I had some business inside the embassy, then after seeing me taking pictures, they realized their mistake. So, while I had been annoyed at missing the protests, in all likelihood I would not have been allowed to photograph them anyway.

I also paid a visit to the air base at Bagram, an hour outside the city, where the majority of the US military are located. According to Afghans I have spoken with, the soldiers never leave the base. My idea had been to talk to soldiers, get their impressions, and possibly "ride

along" as a kind of independent embedded reporter. But that was out of the question. A Public Affairs Officer (PAO) told me that without official press credentials, they couldn't help me, and warned me that if I returned with false credentials I would be imprisoned. Since I'm ostensibly here to study the legal system, that might have been an interesting experiment, but not exactly my style.



The trip wasn't entirely a waste, though, as I did gain some insight as to how the US soldiers think. One PAO warned me of the dangers of Afghanistan and its people. "More than half" of them, I was told, were highly dangerous, just waiting for an opportunity to strike. I was told not to carry money, or my passport, or talk to strangers, etc. This attitude, plus the unreported death of a US soldier last week -- shot by a sniper on the same road from Jalalabad I had traveled a few days later -- helps explain why the US troops killed the Afghan soldiers in front of the embassy.



At first, I was cautious walking along the streets, since one out of every three people said hello to me. This can be exhausting in a large, crowded city. I felt as if I were being accosted continuously. As it turns out, Afghans just find visitors interesting and want to practice speaking English to someone. In an hour's time, one could easily have thirty or forty conversations in which almost no information whatsoever is communicated. Everyone knows a few words of English, but few can afford to take classes. The Afghani people speak a variety of languages, including Pashto, Farsi, and Urdu, which all sound the same to me.

There are thousands of foreigners here, most working either for the UN or an aid organization of some sort or another. They drive around in brand new Toyota land cruisers -- there literally hundreds of these things traveling around the city, in between bicycles, taxis, and horse-drawn or human-drawn carts. The Afghan people consider them to be tourists: they stay in hotels, eat in restaurants, take taxis (for ten times the normal fare) when not in their land cruisers, and buy lots of souvenirs. The Afghans think the aid workers are getting rich in their jobs, and do nothing to help the Afghan people.



In fact, their tourist dollars are really the only source of revenue in this destitute country. Other than opium, of course. In Afghanistan, there are no minerals to mine, no manufacturing, and no telephone lines, even in Kabul. Mobile phones are available to those who can afford them. Twenty four years of continuous war has wrecked the infrastructure and prevented Afghanistan's development. A majority of the people are illiterate. The landscape reminds me of Nevada, but is supposedly fertile.

For the most part, Kabul is a friendly city. The people feel liberated and protected by the ISAF forces. But all of that could change. As was explained to me, when a workman comes to fix your roof, you welcome him and extend to him all the hospitality of your home, and feed him your best food. But eventually, you expect him to leave.

The US drove the Taliban out of Afghanistan and back to Pakistan, where most of them came from, primarily by working with regional commanders, such as those of the Northern Alliance and others based in the south. Those commanders are now integrated into Afghanistan's armed forces, and each still retains the loyalty of his men. This is how the Afghani military is organized. But those forces are no longer being paid by the US. The ISAF forces control Kabul, and while the regional commanders are loyal to the new government, it is they who control most of Afghanistan. Without the stability provided by

the international security forces, Afghanistan could quickly return to its former chaotic state. Yet neither those forces nor the interim government set up in Bonn last year can provide anything but a short term solution for Afghanistan.



By Paul Wolf, May 28, 2003. Permission to reprint is granted, but please let me know if you do so -- paulwolf@icdc.com.

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