



DISCOVERING AN INTRIGUING PIECE OF SOUTHERN AFGHANISTAN

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Being part of the team that accompanied Lt Gen Jim Dutton, ISAF Deputy Commander, for a battlefield circulation to Task Force Uruzgan, in the challenging Afghan South, was a privilege and an interesting experience. My task, as the HQ ISAF Public Affairs representative was to escort Tom Coughlan, an English reporter for “The Time” and “The Economist”, and to organise his part in a busy visit schedule. Therefore, I had the chance, through my conversations with him, to understand better what a dedicated journalist – who has spent more than 5 years living in Afghanistan and reporting from there – thinks of ISAF,

its public affairs and overall situation in this challenged country. It was very constructive to discover how similarly we perceived some aspects of the multifaceted, harsh situation in the South and East, from the public affairs and media perspective, but also how differently we looked at some other issues.

Particularly beneficial for me, as a military professional working in PAO, was to observe the way General Dutton asked questions and collected information in order to gain a more accurate operational overview of the complex situation in Regional Command South and at the same

time any contentious issues that he discovered during the visit. Likewise, it was interesting to observe how the journalist updated his own knowledge about the general situation or some particular issues, which were of particular interest to. It was quickly apparent how interested he was in discovering and understanding the ISAF way of conducting operations across the spectrum of conflict.

The visit to the 4th Afghan Brigade was particularly interesting because it offered me the chance to see for the first time how an Afghan Brigade HQ looks like and to meet a much respected Afghan General. It was encouraging to see how happy the Afghan soldiers seemed at being part of the military and to find out, surprisingly, how well they were getting along with each other no matter their ethnicity or tribal membership. Unexpectedly, it seems that in this case military comradeship is stronger than ethnic and tribal membership.

The Commander of the 4th Afghan Brigade, Brigadier General Abdul Hamid, confessed that many of the soldiers do not take leave to go home because they enjoy staying in the barracks and spending the time with their buddies!

To my surprise, General Hamid appeared to be a very modest and amiable person, he spoke good English and was very willing to share with his guests information about the endeavours of his unit and the difficulties they encounter in fighting the insurgents whilst at the same time providing a safe and secure environment for the province of Uruzgan. I've been told that despite his humble and gentle appearance, General Hamid, who has been fighting in Afghanistan for the last 30 years, is a very firm, respected and competent commander, carrying out his tasks in a very professional manner. Due to his soldiers' dedication and his commitment to fight the insurgents, Uruzgan province is now a safer place. It will be even safer when more Afghan troops are available, in the near future, thus allowing this unit to reach new areas currently controlled by insurgents.

Another fascinating part of the trip was the visit to an Afghan prison. This place was so different from my idea of a prison, that I could write a whole article about it in isolation. It is not my intention to elaborate on

that now, so I will just mention that the prison looked very rudimentary, like a hole in the ground, without ceilings and running water. One intriguing thing about this prison was that the prisoners were cultivating a portion of the prison floor which was made of soil, with flowers and vegetables and were raising doves, many of them white – in Judaism, Christianity and Islam a symbol of peace.

The meeting that gathered together representatives of ISAF, UN, non-governmental organizations, and local officials was also exciting, because I discovered what considerable efforts are made by all these entities in planning, cooperating and working together to address significant problems like poor healthcare, low literacy rate, drought and flooding, lack of water and sanitation, to mention just a few. It was really impressive to find out how much those efforts pay off every day, improving little by little the life of many local people. There is still a lot to do in that part of the country, and every bit of help is welcomed, but it was clear for me that the progress is more obvious day by day.



During the entire visit, I was delighted to discover the professionalism and dedication that many ISAF soldiers demonstrate whilst doing their duty and in helping the Afghans to build a better future for themselves and their country. I was also impressed with the good relationship developed between many Afghans and ISAF soldiers throughout their interactions and in their search to find solutions to the abundant and complex problems they have to face together every day in one of the most challenged provinces in Afghanistan.