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ACTUALITY ON STREETS IN AFGHANISTAN

CUFFE: Afghanistan is at a turning point in its long and troubled history. After two years of transitional government, preparations are underway for the first national election. These people around me – street traders, new restaurant owners, women proudly parading their children – are all eager to take control of their own destiny. And for the US-led coalition, democracy would be a trophy to show off to the world as it hands over power in Iraq. But in this country, where nothing is quite what it seems, life is increasingly insecure. Children are kidnapped, houses robbed, men and women threatened. And against this background of lawlessness, the Taliban are reappearing in pashtu areas of the south and east, while in other regions the warlords tighten their grip on power. What hope is there then for a free and fair election?

SIGNATURE TUNE

ACTUALITY OF SECURITY BRIEFING

MAN: If first anyone gets hit by an IED or a mine, we're going to go ahead and wait for the dust clears, all remaining elements and their gun has been seen security, because how they set up an ambush is to disable the front vehicle for a kill zone.

CUFFE: US soldiers engaged in Operation Enduring Freedom get a quick security briefing before going out on patrol round Kandahar City in southern Afghanistan.

ACTUALITY WITH WALKIE TALKIES

CUFFE: We're driving in one of a convoy of four armoured vehicles. In each there's a soldier with his automatic weapon at the ready. We're heading away from the built-up area towards outlying villages. It's a wild, bleak stretch of country, rimmed by mountains. The only sign of life so far is the occasional herd of goats glimpsed through a cloud of dust. The south and south-east of Afghanistan are former Taliban strongholds. Osama bin Laden may still be hiding over there on the border with Pakistan. And Major David Flynn says there are plenty of signs that the Taliban are gradually creeping back. They've been intimidating villagers by leaving leaflets at night, urging them not to take part in the forthcoming elections.

FLYNN: I have heard of night letters and such. There's been sporadic reports of enemy forces coming into villages and trying to dissuade them from cooperating with the American forces. The enemy forces out here have been very limited small groups, maybe three to five men element that are coming through. They are struggling to gain influence because we've got the upper hand in influence now, so they're trying to gain it back from us.

CUFFE: Al Qaeda is almost certainly behind recent attacks in Kandahar. The UN representative in the province, Masadykov Talatbeg, admits to being worried.

TALATBEG: The security situation, I cannot say that this is secure now. I think that the security situation is getting worse. We have to admit it. We have Taliban, Al Qaeda attacks. They are attacking district centres and they are able to do it.

CUFFE: And how many people have died?

TALATBEG: Dozens, dozens of people, they are dying.

CUFFE: Who are these terrorists? Are they all Afghan people?

TALATBEG: Part of them they are Afghans or Pashtuns, part of this country, refugees living in Pakistan and part of them they are Al Qaedas. In this country people say Al Qaeda it mean they foreigners, like Arabs, Punjabis from Pakistan, like Chechen Uzbeks from former Soviet Union.

CUFFE: So what is their motive, do you think?

TALATBEG: To destabilise the situation in Afghanistan and to disrupt the political processes in Afghanistan. This is the main goal of these attacks and of these terrorists.

CUFFE: The closer Afghanistan gets to holding its first national election, the more dangerous it becomes. Since the beginning of the year, nineteen humanitarian workers have been killed and fifteen wounded. Giuseppe Renda of the International Committee of the Red Cross says parts of the country previously considered safe are now out of bounds.

RENDA: For the moment what we are facing are difficulties in the pashtu rural areas. After the killing of our colleagues in March 2003 we did decide not to have any more field trips in the rural area around Kandahar and Jalalabad. They are obviously trying to destabilise the government and probably to target also NGOs or international workers. You don't know. It is very difficult to read the Afghan context now.

CUFFE: Afghans are as anxious as anyone to see an end to terrorism. Most of them welcome the presence of the international community and the resources they bring, and they don't want them to pack up their bags in fright and leave. But as the 20,000 coalition troops struggle to keep Al Qaeda at bay, the risks for people here increase by the day. In recent months there's been a spate of robberies and hijacks, and in a new and sinister twist, children have begun to disappear.

ACTUALITY ON OUTSKIRTS OF KANDAHAR

CUFFE: This is a quiet residential neighbourhood on the outskirts of Kandahar, an area called the Big Stream because of the canal running through it. It's not the kind of place you want to visit after dark. Robbers operate here, and last night there was a killing. I've come to see Jamal Gul, a cloth merchant whose family has been targeted by criminals.

GUL: [Speaks in Afghan]

CUFFE: He tells me that one Friday five months ago, his three year old son, Nakibullah, went missing and he spent the next sixteen days searching for him, even going across the border into Pakistan. Then he got a letter demanding the equivalent of about £2,500.

GUL (VIA INTERPRETER): I didn't have that money and I couldn't send it the first time, and then I received a letter with an envelope including the fingers of my son. They were asking me to borrow this money and find it wherever you can find this money, and if you do not find it we will next time send his head to you.

CUFFE: Jamal was told to leave the money by a bridge in the centre of town, but instead he wrote back asking for proof that his son was still alive. The next letter he got contained a child's toe. That drove him to borrow the money and leave it for the kidnapers. Then, thirty-two days after Nakibullah disappeared, he was found drugged and naked by the side of the road.

ACTUALITY WITH BANDAGES, ETC

CUFFE: We've got the bandages here and they are covered with blood, and there is a little little index finger and a little toe, and it is his big toe, and this pile of letters. What are they written on, pencil, and in airmail envelopes, they came in airmail envelopes. So we have all this on the floor, and the child himself is sitting here, and he has his missing finger and his missing toe. But he is at least back home safe. Do you have any idea who did this?

GUL (VIA INTERPRETER): No idea. I do not know who has done it. I do not have enmity with anyone. They told me that we are doing that with others, not just you, just send me money and obey our orders and even if you are son of Karzai you would not be able to get back your son. We have guns, we have equipments, we have vehicles and no one can arrest us. You should pay me the money if you want back your child.

CUFFE: Shocking as it is, this is not an isolated incident. The government recently announced that 150 cases of child kidnapping have been reported in the last eighteen months. Dr Abdullah Laghmani is head of police intelligence in Kandahar province. Earlier this month he received information that two boys were being held captive in a house seventy miles away.

LAGHMANI (VIA INTERPRETER): One of them was six, the other about ten or eleven. They were kept in the worst condition imaginable. It was a horrifying sight. They were bedraggled and half-starved. They had been beaten and cruelly treated and they were warned, if your relatives don't send money, we will chop off your fingers, and they drew a line across their fingers showing where they would be cut. The boys told us that as they were moved from one district to another, they saw four other children with their bodies ripped open, but they couldn't give us a description of the place, so we couldn't find the bodies.

CUFFE: So do you think that this is an organised crime that you are now investigating, and why do you think those children were killed and their bodies torn open?

LAGHMANI (VIA INTERPRETER): They send organs to Pakistan and sell them. There is a trade in body organs in Pakistan.

CUFFE: And who is doing this?

LAGHMANI (VIA INTERPRETER): It's a series of criminals here in Afghanistan and also on the other side of the border in Pakistan, and they are connected to each other.

CUFFE: Unusually, a man has been arrested for kidnapping the two boys. But Kandahar doesn't have the courts and judges that can try him, and he may well be able to buy his way to freedom. It's two years on from the Loya Jirga, the traditional meeting which set up the transitional government. But the deputy Interior Minister, Halal Uddin Halal, admits there's no effective criminal justice system.

HALAL (VIA INTERPRETER): I agree that there is corruption in the system, but there is a reason for that corruption. The prosecutors, judges and others working in the courts have difficulty making ends meet. Their salaries and policies are too low for a decent standard of living. Therefore I argue the judicial system is in a mess and is not working properly.

CUFFE: So isn't it essential to put these things in place and to improve salaries so that you can have a properly functioning justice system and make the people of Afghanistan feel secure?

HALAL (VIA INTERPRETER): You can have justice once you have established authority and ensured the welfare of everyone, especially government officials. They need to be paid properly for government to run effectively.

CUFFE: But paying more to judges and government officials won't solve the problem of lawlessness in Afghanistan. It's too deeply entrenched in the very structure of society. This is a place where nothing is quite what it seems.

ACTUALITY OF MUSIC IN STREETS

CUFFE: There are open drains running along the streets of Kandahar, and intermittent electricity supplies, but everywhere you look the builders are at work. Donor countries like Britain have poured billions of pounds into reconstruction, but most of the economic growth here is not the result of international largesse. Abdullah runs an Afghan NGO, and back in his office he told me that the drugs trade is the secret of Kandahar's success. Out on the street he's not so comfortable talking about it. What is the building that's taking place here?

ABDULLAH: Which buildings?

CUFFE: Well all around. What have we got here?

ABDULLAH: These are private buildings. These are private buildings, and this is a clinic, like.

CUFFE: Who will live in these private buildings here? They're very tall, impressive buildings, aren't they? This one is a bit like a palace here.

ABDULLAH: Yeah. All these buildings belong to one person.

CUFFE: And how have they got the money for these buildings?

ABDULLAH: [laughs] That's a dangerous question. That's dangerous.

CUFFE: There are a lot of dangerous questions in this country. Afghanistan is now responsible for three-quarters of the world's supply of heroin. It also does a flourishing trade in cannabis, and together they account for a third of the country's wealth. The British government has led a campaign to burn the opium crop and persuade farmers to grow something else, but without success. Diane Johnson, country director for the US charity, Mercy Corps, says there's a narco-mafia operating.

JOHNSON: I believe that drugs are the number one cause of insecurity right now, and I think there has been a lot of talk lately amongst different security forces that the narcotics are pervading everything. They fuel the terrorism, they fuel a lot of the crime, they certainly help put people in power positions that are able to then cause other farmers and people to be pressured to either grow or trade the drugs.

CUFFE: So what's been done to tackle the problem?

JOHNSON: Not enough. There's lots of talk about doing things like training police, there's some training of narcotics police underway, but it's too little and almost too late to really make an impact. That window of opportunity to take care of the problem has been slowly closing over the last year. It's the number one factor underlying everything. But it is very much related to the lack of the rule of law. Trying to implement growing drugs as being illegal when no other laws are being enforced just doesn't make any sense to people. They're not going to not grow poppy when their land is being grabbed, when people are being robbed, when children are being kidnapped, etc.

CUFFE: In this atmosphere of lawlessness, Jamal Gul, the man whose son was kidnapped, says he doesn't know whether to go back to his cloth business to support his wife and children, or stay at home to protect them. There's a disturbing feature of the case which makes him suspect the criminals who took Nakibullah will never be found. The little boy is now frightened of anyone wearing a military uniform.

GUL [VIA INTERPRETER]: He cannot say what happened to him, but whenever he sees someone on the TV with uniform, or he sees someone in the bazaar with uniform, he tells me, 'Give me a Kalashnikov gun, I want to kill him. He has the hat, he has the uniform, this is him, give me the gun, I want to kill him.' Even if we can find this guy, we can do nothing with him, because he is more powerful than me. And even if we arrest him and we are giving him to the security force, the next day I will see him walking in the street.

CUFFE: This is a society where criminals are untouchable if they have got connections to the people in power.

ACTUALITY IN KANDAHAR

CUFFE: Kandahar is the seat of kings, home to a succession of rulers of Afghanistan and to the current president, Hamid Karzai. But who rules Kandahar? In theory it's the Governor, Engineer Pashtun, who lives here in a large compound guarded by soldiers. But it's not his picture that hangs above the main road and in the office of the police chief. The face staring out beneath the brim of an army cap is that of the ex Governor, Gul Agar, a former Mujahedin commander. Everyone who lives and works here will tell you he's the most powerful man in the district.

ACTUALITY WITH SARAH CHASE TALKING PASHTU

CUFFE: Sarah Chase runs a distribution centre for dairy farmers. She's also an academic writing a book on the political situation in Afghanistan. Propped up against the wall of her simple home is a Kalashnikov – a necessary protection after the threats she's received from an unnamed source. Her mistake may have been in criticising leaders like Gul Agar.

CHASE: He is now technically a minister in Kabul. However, because all of his provincial administration have remained behind, and because the new governor is a close friend of his, de facto he really continues to run the province substantively.

CUFFE: Why are people so frightened of him?

CHASE: People are abducted, they are beaten, they are sodomised, you name it. People are denounced as Taliban who are simply personal enemies, or for money and then given over to the Americans, and then there's a lot of knock-on oppression which happens because of this kind of impunity that he allows. Other things that he is involved in obviously include narcotics trafficking, or at least taking cuts for providing free passage to narcotics deliveries toward Pakistan and Iran. There's plenty more than his men, these armed thugs are doing just on their own, and he is not preventing it.

CUFFE: We decided to call on Gul Agar and found him in a house in the Governor's compound, playing court to tribal chiefs. Twenty-five turbaned heads turned as we walked in, and eyes glittered from weatherbeaten faces. Gul Agar, heavy-jowled with a black beard, was sitting at the far end of the room in an armchair, toying with his worry beads. Would you say that you had more power than the current Governor of Governor Pashtun?

AGAR [VIA INTERPRETER]: Governor Pashtun is also from Kandahar and I am also from Kandahar. There is no difference between me and Governor Pashtun. These are the people who are powerful.

CUFFE: You are described as a warlord, and there are some who criticise you for what you have done in the past and for involvement in activities such as the opium trade. What do you say to that?

AGAR [VIA INTERPRETER]: It's the judgement of people if they call me warlord. I have defended Islam and my country. I am the first one who accepted after war was finished by the order of Karzai I left my soldiers and I left my job here and I went to Kabul City. Now I am a politician. I have defended Islam and my country. I am a Mujahid, not a gunman. So I am a Mujahid and a Mujahid will never involve in drugs. I am a businessman, we are a rich family, all the worlds know me and they know my brothers. We will never be involved in the drugs. When I was a Governor, everyone knows that I caught a lot of heroins and drugs and I burned them, and everyone knows about that.

CUFFE: Gul Agar makes the most of his credentials as a minister in the transitional government. Whatever his past, he now claims respectability. But many believe that the international community made a fatal error when it decided to bring people like him into

PASHTUN: If the people give the word for that person, then nothing in the world can do, nobody can do this. If the people want it, because the world is thinking that the person is a warlord, maybe he is a warlord, like killing innocent people, looting people, forcing people, putting people illegally in jail, not accepting the order from the central government or his boss. These are the definition of the warlord. If the person has no record of these things, that nobody will accept that. If somebody goes tomorrow to the Parliament of Afghanistan and he gets the vote, I think he deserves that if we believe in democracy.

CUFFE: As Khalid Pashtun says, Afghans are now being given the chance to choose their leaders. A free and fair election was the final item on a checklist of measures set out by the international community in December 2001 at a conference in Bonn. The transitional government was to rule for 18 months before going to the polls, and although the election date seems to be slipping, preparations are well underway. In Kabul, the first candidates are beginning to declare themselves.

ACTUALITY AT ELECTION RALLY

CUFFE: Inside the packed conference hall at this hotel, about 700 people, many of them students, are listening to election candidates setting out their plans for the future. The man who is now on the platform is attacking President Karzai, and the more critical and impassioned he is, the more applause he gets. [APPLAUSE]. We take this kind of meeting for granted, but here in Afghanistan it marks a remarkable step on the road to democracy, however rocky that road may be.

ACTUALITY OF SINGING

CUFFE: Outside the city there's less enthusiasm for this election. So far only about 3.5 million eligible Afghans have registered to vote out of a population of 8 or 9 million. A bomb in Jalalabad last week, which killed two women with a child on their way to register, sent out a warning that no one can afford to ignore. In some areas, UN officials haven't been able to set up registration centres because of the lack of security. Mohammed Mayar, who works for an Afghan NGO, is worried. A thoughtful man, who watched his fellow countrymen tear each other apart in 23 years of war, he longs for a new beginning. But like many of the people we spoke to, he fears the election is coming too soon and he thinks it's tied to a foreign, not an Afghan agenda.

MAYAR: American elections will come in November. Bush wants to have something, you know, for the people. Okay, see, I have brought this democracy to the people of Afghanistan, so now the people of Afghanistan have their elected president and the people of Afghanistan has elected House of Representatives and the Senate. Let's see, this is a Muslim country, now this is a sample of democracy. So he will tell the people yes, I have this, I have done so, please vote for me.

CUFFE: And will it be democracy, in your view?

MAYAR: I don't have much hope. Even if there is election, I don't think it will be free and fair election, I don't think so. Still these warlords are in power, still by one way or the other they will interfere. I don't have much hope for it.

CUFFE: Many Afghans looked to the international community to provide the security needed for a working democracy. Their first disappointment was when the International Security Assistance Force, ISAF, confined its operations to Kabul and then Kunduz in the north. This week NATO has announced that it's sending 1,200 more troops to strengthen security in Kabul in the run-up to the election and perhaps provide reactive units elsewhere. General Rick Hillier, the Canadian in command of ISAF, doesn't underestimate the difficulties ahead.

HILLIER: I'd describe the security situation as challenging and fragile. There is a lot of work been done to build police forces, build the Afghan national army, international military forces working with the Afghan government to make it better. There's still a lot of work to be done, and security is not yet substantive and it's not yet deep. It cannot yet be taken for granted. As we lead towards the elections that are predicted for late September or early October, the level of stress has increased as we try to assist the Afghan government in moving its authority around the rest of the countryside, that means that you actually start to reduce the power from some of the local fiefdoms, and therefore attacks can perhaps have greater consequences, and therefore there is a greater willingness, and we have seen some of the preparations and some of the planning and some of the moves to launch attacks in these next days, weeks and couple of months, and of course we're taking lots of measures to try and pre-empt them.

CUFFE: Now we see no reduction in the power of the warlords, and the Afghans that we have spoken to say that the warlords are just as powerful as ever.

HILLIER: The moves to now extend the government authority and the rule of law throughout the entire country of Afghanistan really are truly beginning now, so they're probably right in that they haven't seen a reduction in the power of the warlords yet, and that's part of the process which is now ongoing.

CUFFE: To weaken the grip of the warlords and their militia and ensure that the election is free and fair, the UN and transitional government have started a process of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration – or DDR. They've also persuaded a number of commanders to hand in their heavy weapons.

ACTUALITY WITH JAPANESE AMBASSADOR

CUFFE: The Japanese are overseeing the demilitarisation programme, and the ambassador, Kinichi Komano, has invited us to look at the weaponry handed in so far. We've driven out of Kabul to the Afghan National Army base on the Jalalabad road, and under a blistering afternoon sun we can see a row of elderly cannon on one side and on the other sixteen vehicles carrying rocket and missile launchers. In 2001, some of them would have been used in the surrounding mountains to bombard the Taliban down here in the plain below. Those missile launchers belong to the man who was once one of the country's most notorious warlords, Marshall Fahim, now Minister of Defence. But he's not handed them over for good. He still maintains a private army outside Kabul, and his arrangement with the government means he can come and collect the weapons any time he wants.

ACTUALITY AT LOCK-UP

CUFFE: On the same site there's a row of containers, with four sets of locks on each. This is where small arms from all over the country are stored under the DDR programme. For every weapon that's handed in, a military commander receives funds to repatriate one man. 100,000 men are supposed to be disarmed before the election, with a preliminary target of 40,000 before the end of June. The process is supervised by the Afghan National Army and UN officials, like Cliff Bablitz.

BABLITZ: This is a container of weapons we've collected from Kabul and Masari Sharif.

CUFFE: How many in here altogether?

BABLITZ: This container is probably holding a thousand weapons. This is an RPD machine gun. It's very effective, fast rate of fire. It has a drum magazine, it fits 75 rounds in the magazine. Very easy to operate this one.

CUFFE: How long has it taken to collect these weapons?

BABLITZ: We've been collecting weapons since late January.

CUFFE: You've got this difficult target of 40% of DDR. Do you think you'll meet it?

BABLITZ: Well, we're ever hopeful.

CUFFE: The deadline for disarming 40,000 men has now passed, but only 11,000 have given up their weapons. Vikram Parekh, a political analyst with the influential think-tank, the International Crisis Group, thinks the people being counted aren't necessarily the right people, and only the oldest weapons are being handed in.

PAREKH: A lot of the weapons that have been handed over, a fair proportion of them have been junk. There has been a certain amount of even World War II era vintage equipment being turned over. It might be worth more, in fact, on the collector's market than it would be in terms of actual utility in combat here. There are believed to be, you know, significant stores of medium and heavy weaponry that has simply been kept out of view. The biggest problem with the DDR process is that it's not negotiated on the basis of reality. I mean, there's an abstract figure of 100,000 militia men, and that's a political decision, so you're not really making a dent on the security environment here. Unless you identify a target, those individuals who actually have the capacity and the resources to mobilise people, and that means making an investment in intelligence gathering, finding out who are the people in each district, in each village who will put together a force if called upon to do so.

CUFFE: Ironically, while some private militia are being disarmed, it seems others are being re-equipped. In the south of Afghanistan, the Governor of Kandahar

TALATBEG: I would be so, you know, critical, because you know that he tries to do his best, and I think that we have to support him. It would be much more better and acceptable for everyone if central government would fix this problem, deploying already trained ANA and Afghan National Police in the South, but time is going, insurgents are coming, number of incidences are increasing. It means that the security situation is getting worse and we have to fix it. Of course I would agree that partly is nonsense, but we are trying to disarm and at the same time to recruit, but what we can do?

CUFFE: There's already a confusing array of military forces supposed to provide security for the people of Afghanistan. And Diane Johnson of Mercy Corps says another will only add to the sense of chaos.

JOHNSON: You have ISAF, who's trying to do law and order in Kabul City, and they have not much range beyond that. You have the coalition, primarily in the south, who are focused on a war, not necessarily focused on security provision other than for their own force protection. You have the Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police. You have provincial level police who report to the Governors. Governors have their own militias. You have the Afghan military forces, the AMF, which were the semi legitimate previous armed forces. And now you have a proliferation of private security companies that are typically foreigners.

CUFFE: So who is in overall control?

JOHNSON: Very hard to say. And very unclear for even people in NGOs, let alone for the average Afghan on the street to figure out who's who with the guns.

CUFFE: And who should be in control?

JOHNSON: The agreement of the State Building Exercise is that the central government should be in control, but the central government needs to be seen as being legitimate and as being non partial for that to have any effect, and I think right now there is a real crisis in confidence in that central government. And because of the way Afghanistan is structured, the real control lies at the provincial level, so it is the governors who actually end up with much more regional power than the central government.

CUFFE: The UN is desperately trying to keep the democratic process on track, but recent events threaten to sabotage their efforts.

ACTUALITY OF UN PRESS CONFERENCE

MAN: The Special Representative of the Secretary General for Afghanistan is appalled by the killing of the eleven Chinese construction workers on the outskirts of...

CUFFE: News of yet another attack on foreigners was read out at the weekly press briefing earlier this month. No one yet knows who was responsible for the deaths of the eleven Chinese workers, but it was an area that had previously been considered safe. Earlier this week, ten Afghans were killed on a bus. They were carrying voter registration cards, and it's believed the Taliban was to blame. Sarah Chase, in her Kandahar dairy, thinks it may be time for people like her to leave. For those without that option the future is far from clear.

CHASE: There is definitely a palpable pressure on this region by resurgent Taliban elements. The impact on society here in Kandahar is very noticeable and has been growing in the last, I would say six months to a year. Remember that this is a society in trauma, that is therefore very very susceptible to pressure and to intimidation. So when you have groups of Taliban who are trying to intimidate people into not cooperating with the current regime, not cooperating with the international community, people are very responsive to that. They've seen so many overthrown governments in the past, you know, couple of decades, they can't guarantee that the Americans are here for good. I mean, the Russians certainly looked like they were going to be here for good and they weren't. So they are very good bet-hedgers, Afghans, and they're hedging their bets.

CUFFE: If the election is delayed, in a sense the terrorists will have won. But if it's held in the present climate of insecurity and fear, it won't have the credibility that's needed to form a strong central government. Power will still lie with men who rule by the gun, against a background of drug dealing and crime. If the new administration in Iraq is looking for a route map to democracy, it won't find it here in Afghanistan.

SIGNATURE TUNE