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Sunday, January 03, 2010

Marines Give Taliban the Boot... The Resurgence of Now Zad

Regimental Combat Team-7, 1st Marine Division Public Affairs Story by Cpl. Zachary Nola

01.02.2010 NOW ZAD, Helmand province, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan – In early December, the Marines of Lima Company, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment, breached Now Zad and rid the second largest city in Helmand province of its Taliban presence during Operation Cobra's Anger.

The Marines are now bearing witness to the results of an effective combat operation – Afghan children are back in school, markets are reopening and people are slowly returning to their homes.

Just a few years ago, Now Zad was a thriving city, home to 30,000 Afghan residents, complete with health clinics, schools, electricity, paved streets and adequate water supplies.

The city's residents fled in 2006 due to a Taliban takeover, and were forced to pay rent to live in other villages. Constant fighting between coalition forces and Taliban fighters to lay claim to the city quickly turned the area into a no man's land. The collateral damage associated with such fighting, coupled with neglect resulted in the city slipping into ruin.

Nevertheless, in the recent weeks the mood in this once somber area has been lifted, as citizens from the Now Zad area



have returned to reclaim and rebuild.

Businessmen have returned to their shops, residents to their home and children to school.

"Cobra's Anger gave us the chance to displace Taliban leadership, locate and destroy Taliban supply storages, [improvised explosive devices] and weapons, as well as the opportunity to further push out and secure the local populace," said Capt. Jason Brezler, the team leader for the 3/4 civil affairs group. "In conjunction with that, we started going out and leveraging folks to return, because we know the greatest source of instability is them being displaced for such a long period of time, with really no economic means and really no economic opportunity."

Shortly after sunrise, men of all ages arrived at the Now Zad district center with shovel in hand and swept sidewalks, removed dirt from drainage ways, salvaged bricks, cut down overgrowth and hauled trash away.

"They get paid daily 250 [Afghan dollars] ,which is a very good day's salary for them," said Brezler, 31, from Bronx, N.Y. "They have a legitimate means of income to put food on their tables for their families and take care of their basic needs without having to resort to working for the Taliban."

While their fathers are busy removing the stains of Taliban repression, the younger Afghan generation is busy receiving an education at the Now Zad District Center.

"The first day we put up a school, got some kids to come, told some workers we'd pay them to help start cleaning up the bazaar and district center, and then it started to build," said Brezler. "We went from 30 workers a day to upwards of 500 a day and having 30 kids a day in school to having 160 kids a day in school."

"In the last few weeks, everything that has happened has far exceeded my expectations," said Brezler. "I thought even just the things that have happened to date would take potentially months."

The reconstruction effort received a greater momentum with the arrival of Sayed Murad Agah, the Now Zad district governor, who recently toured the district center, school and bazaar.

"It's a great thing that reconstruction is going on in the Now Zad district," said Agah, through an interpreter. "We are showing the people that we are helping them. We can show them that the enemy, the Taliban, never helped them this way and we are here to rebuild and return them back to their own areas."

While progress has been made, more is still to come. The future holds a continued effort to clean up the market and repair shops, homes, the schoolhouse, mosques, health clinic and basic life services.

Much work stills remains ahead in order to return Now Zad's market and district center back to its former condition, but local villagers seem patient and determined to not only restore the area, but make it better then it was before. With the help of God, Afghan national security forces and a few Marines, the people of Now Zad are walking in the direction of peace and prosperity and setting an example for all of Afghanistan to follow.

"We still have a lot of limitations and a lot of challenges we need to overcome," said Brezler. "But every day we're finding ways to leave the city a little bit better at the end of that day, than it was previously."

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