



A Taliban member is caught placing IEDs. He is held prisoner in a US camp before being transported to a different camp for interrogation



Taliban members who were caught placing IEDs. Their hands are bound with cable ties

In Focus

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For the men of the US Army's 101st Airborne Division operating in the Afghan province of Paktika, the countdown is ever present. The Screaming Eagles, as they're known, are about to spread their wings and fly home. Plans are being discussed to withdraw 70,000 US troops from Afghanistan over the next three years, while commanders are believed to be preparing to pull out up to 10,000 by the end of this year.

Lying back and taking it easy during the final months of their mission is not an option: the 101st Airborne is devoted to Operation Dragon. To this end, the division is going to set up a checkpoint and police compound for the Afghan Border Police. But it first has to hunt down and eradicate the Taliban threat.

As of June, 131 soldiers have been killed during the 101st Airborne's Afghanistan-wide deployment. The death toll is the division's highest in any single deployment since the Vietnam War.

Geographically, the centre of Operation Dragon is Niamatabad, an impoverished bazaar near the Pakistani border. The

Out of Afghanistan: Journalist **IRENE DE KRUIF** and photographer **MARIELLE VAN UITERT** join US troops on the ground in Afghanistan to see whether the country is ready for an American pull-out

bazaar comprises some 20 shops, four petrol stations, two restaurants and two hotels, all spread out along a single dirt road. Some shops have roofs, others don't. Some shopkeepers are aiding and abetting Taliban, while others are neutral.

Niamatabad may be a mud-hut village but it holds great strategic importance for the Americans. In spring, the area saw a substantial number of Wazaris – nomads who often work as mercenaries for the Taliban – infiltrate through the Pakistani border to fight. Niamatabad, with its four petrol stations, is essential for the Taliban and their war effort. By building a checkpoint, the Americans hope to stop insurgents in Niamatabad.

➤ The 101st Airborne's deployment of more than 20,000 troops is the first time an entire US Army division has been used during the conflict

departure?



The Afghan Border Police consists of young men who have the dangerous job of protecting the Afghan-Pakistan border (left); Everybody in the bazaar village is a suspect and everybody is watched closely (top); The 101st Airborne is examining the roads to the Pakistan border. Females are not questioned; this mother is protecting her child against the military invasion (above)

The operation is a textbook example of the 'Shape, Clear, Hold and Build' strategy introduced by General Stanley McChrystal two years ago before his retirement as commander of the US forces in Afghanistan. It's war like the White House wants it. As the infantry hunts Taliban with the Afghan Border Police, US engineers build a compound and a checkpoint. Meanwhile top brass drink tea with the locals to win hearts and minds.

The Whiskey Company is in charge of hunting Taliban. With some 60 US soldiers and the same number of Afghan Border Police, they go on daily patrols. 'We don't catch many Taliban,' says one soldier proudly. 'Mostly we just shoot them.'

There are two prisoners lying on a bench at the company's base. They have been waiting for five days to be taken to a larger military compound for questioning. Their hands are cuffed with cable ties and their heads are covered with bandages. 'They are Talibs,' says one US soldier. 'Caught red-handed placing an improvised explosive device.'

Tracking down Taliban is seldom easy

➤ Turn the page for more on Afghanistan

Niamatabad is a bazaar 30 clicks from the Pakistan border where Taliban used to stop for fuel and accommodation. Now the US has taken over the village and every traveller passing through is questioned. The bazaar consists of some 20 shops, four petrol stations, two restaurants and two hotels, all spread out along a single dirt road



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Bread used to be baked for Taliban – now the Afghan Border Police is the customer (above); Tradesmen are questioned about possible Taliban movements after arousing suspicion. They are scared but cannot explain why. Intel suggests they met 200 Taliban plotting an ambush (right); An Afghan village chief shakes hands with the Americans and thanks them for building a camp in Niamatabad (above right)



The going

Out of Afghanistan: Journalist **IRENE DE KRUIF** and photographer **MARIELLE VAN UITERT** report on the fears of Afghan locals if US forces leave



A trader in Niamatabad hopes he can still make ends meet now his main provider of income – Taliban – is kept away from the bazaar

In Niamatabad Captain Rasscher of the US Army's 101st Airborne Division needs to advance the Afghan Border Police a bit. 'Let me do the hearts-and-minds thing,' he says, laughing. With a loaded gun and a bulletproof jacket, he drinks tea with Idak, one of Niamatabad's elders. Idak was involved in planning a Pakistani border checkpoint on the start but has now decided he wants out after learning it will be manned by Afghan troops instead of Americans.

'The Taliban is going to arrest us all,' he says. 'This place is way too important for them.' Idak is afraid of the Taliban. 'Two weeks ago, after you bombed the weapons cache, they arrested two of our men and took them to Pakistan. They were held there for ten days.'

'That's why we build a security checkpoint,' Rasscher says. 'You agreed to it months ago. My soldiers will check up on the border police and the commander of the Afghan Border Police, Lieutenant Loqman, is a great guy.'

Rasscher is annoyed by the locals' sudden misgivings. The Americans are putting all their chips on the new Afghan government, which has to take over from the coalition forces. Rasscher doesn't think Idak and his villagers are afraid of Taliban, they're afraid of losing money spent by the Americans. 'When Americans guard the checkpoint it means all kinds of government money for the villagers,' Rasscher says. 'Of course they want us here but that's not how you build a country.'

Foreign interference in the Afghan economy is a tricky affair. According to the World Bank, foreign military expenses and donor money account for 97 per cent of the Afghan gross domestic product. Niamatabad is typical: the bazaar sprung up in 2001 in parallel to the establishment of a nearby US compound. Shopkeepers made their money from the military base. When it closed in 2005, the Taliban returned. All of a sudden they became the main source of income for the shopkeepers. What will happen to the micro-economy if the Americans and the Taliban go away?

Meanwhile, infantry are searching for Taliban. Informants say about 200 fighters are planning an attack on the construction site in Niamatabad. The soldiers go on patrol with the border

police. On their way, they stop every male of an age appropriate for Taliban combat service. The soldiers examine the shoes and hands of the people they stop for questioning.

'Worker hands are OK, these people make their money in the field,' says Franz, a soldier on one of the patrols. 'Soft hands are suspicious, they can study inside the whole day. Look at this guy, he's a f***ing bad guy,' Franz adds, inspecting one soft-palmed individual. But he can't detain the man with the velvety hands: there's not enough proof. They put all the men in the US HIIDE (biometric identification) system. Using a small device, soldiers scan suspects' irises and fingerprints. If they find a fingerprint on a bomb, they may be able to trace it.

Suddenly, about 20km from Niamatabad, three men wearing army jackets run away. Together with the Americans, Afghan Border Police pursue and catch them. 'These are Taliban scouts, for sure,' Lieutenant Yost declares.

Taliban are nearby but initiate no attack. 'We've got too many troops here,' says Captain Rasscher. 'Right now they don't have the guts.'

This worries Idak. 'What should we do when the Americans are gone?' he asks a US scout. 'Can the Afghan border police handle 200 Talibs?'

'I hope so,' answers the scout. 'Otherwise we just built a very expensive compound for nothing. You guys have to make it work.'



Bedouin travelling with their camels from Pakistan to Afghanistan are questioned. A young boy is scared by the weapons

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Fingerprints of all Afghans passing a US patrol are taken using the HIIDE-system (left); Bedouin who travel with their camels from Pakistan to Afghanistan are questioned at the roadside. Iris scans are taken (above)

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