



## Afghan farmers at war's epicentre play both sides

May 24, 2010



A US soldier from 2nd Platoon Bravo Company 5/2 ID Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT) 1-17 Infantry Battalion patrols through pomegranate trees at Shahwali kot. *(Photo courtesy: AFP)*

ARGHANDAB, May 24 (AFP) - Lush pomegranate orchards provide perfect cover for the Taliban, who have turned what should be the fruit basket of Afghanistan into one of the hottest spots of the long insurgency.

In the past year the crude bombs that are the Taliban's battlefield talisman have been responsible for the deaths of all foreign soldiers patrolling this valley from 13 bases on each side of the Arghandab River, the US military said.

Arghandab, 20 kilometres (12 miles) from Kandahar city, capital of the eponymous province in southern Afghanistan that the insurgents regard as their fiefdom, is at the epicentre of a war well into its ninth year.

The district produces half the 100,000 tonnes of pomegranates grown in Afghanistan each year, but is better known for the harvest of IEDs, or improvised explosive devices, that seem as thickly seeded as the fruit trees.

American troopers on patrol around the villages near Forward Operating Base (FOB) Arghandab point to culverts along canals irrigating the orchards as favourite corners for Taliban ambushes.

An explosion across the river to the east was "probably an IED," said one.

"Someone might have stepped on it. Or it could have been a controlled detonation," he said. "Either way, we're finding them."

Almost 60 percent of the more than 200 foreign troop deaths in Afghanistan this year were caused by IEDs, or improvised explosive devices, the independent [icasualties.org](http://icasualties.org) website says.

In Arghandab, a village school has become a proxy battleground between the Taliban and pro-government forces, said US Army Sergeant Stephen Decatur, as he described last month's find of "nine medium-to-small, 20-50 pound jugs of home-made bombs planted around the school yard".



"In January, over the course of 10 days, they found hundreds and hundreds of pounds of explosives and IEDS," he said, adding that some of the bombs contained up to 300 pounds (136 kilogrammes) of explosives.

"There are a lot of advantages to being in Arghandab, mainly because there is so much agriculture -- pomegranate orchards have a lot of cover from observation from the air and close air support."

As US and NATO forces prepare the slow strangulation of the insurgents over the coming summer months, Afghanistan's Western supporters are, finally, trying to address the economic fundamentals fuelling the fight.

Poverty, unemployment at the heart of unrest

More than 70 percent of Afghanistan's population are tied to the land as tenant farmers or sharecroppers, experts say. The CIA put unemployment in 2008 at 35 percent and inflation last year at 30.5 percent.

Afghanistan produces more than 90 percent of the world's opium and the 2.8-billion-dollar-a-year illicit industry helps drugs gangs pay the Taliban for armed muscle to protect production and distribution routes.

With the realisation that the insurgency is largely economic rather than ideological -- and that many Taliban foot soldiers are simply unemployed men who need the fighting fee to feed their families -- Western donors have started channelling their efforts to the grass roots of Afghan society.

In Arghandab, Washington's international aid arm USAID believes its programme to teach Afghan farmers modern techniques for boosting quality and yield has the flow-on benefit of improving security.

The head of the local council of elders, Haji Mohammad agreed, telling AFP the project is creating jobs that give the fighting-age men of the area an alternative to picking up a gun for 20 dollars a day.

Since the introduction of USAID's AVIPA (Afghanistan Vouchers for Increased Production in Agriculture) project, Arghandab's pomegranate yield has leapt by 75 percent, to 15-20 kilogrammes of fruit per tree, he said.

"It has also provided jobs, people are now earning money, so in the many villages where we have projects there is no problem with security," Mohammad said.

"People here are poor and so they were used by other people with bad intentions. But if they can have jobs that earn them money from honest work, they can become independent, so in the coming years they won't need to go fighting."

The four-month cash-for-work project was pouring 400,000 afghanis (8,800 dollars) every month into each of Arghandab's 72 villages, paying farm workers 300 afghanis daily, said local AVIPA supervisor, Obeidullah, who uses one name.

The cost of building roads and reservoirs, as well as tractors, chemicals and other equipment was extra, he said.

The AVIPA programme is worth a total of almost 400 million dollars.

That money is welcomed in most farming communities of Afghanistan -- among the poorest countries in the world -- and Arghandab is no exception.



As Obeidullah and Mohammad extolled its benefits, local elders relaxed on carpets nearby, drinking tea and eating apricots, nodding their agreement but reluctant to talk or have their photographs taken for fear of reprisals, one said, from the Taliban.

'Taliban know how to make their point'

Scepticism about the longevity of the international presence that is keeping the Taliban at bay is widespread in Afghanistan.

Many fear that once international troops, currently numbering 130,000, withdraw, which they regard as inevitable, the insurgents will reassert control and take revenge on anyone who cooperated with the other side.

US officials and soldiers said the Taliban maintain influence in Arghandab, using what one American, speaking anonymously, described as "ruthless" intimidation techniques.

Taliban had cut off arms and hanged people suspected of working with the coalition, and kidnapped children for ransom, he said.

"They know how to make their point, they're ruthless. The farmers have a hard time, going into the fields where the Taliban put IEDs if they think they are on patrol routes for the US, the Canadians or the Afghan army," he said.

"Innocent civilians are hit pretty hard. The Taliban are still a very real threat."

Unless the AVIPA scheme and others like it -- such as the British attempt in neighbouring Helmand province to encourage poppy growers to switch to food crops -- are quickly followed up with marketing and storage programmes, experts and officials said, any gains are unsustainable.

"There needs to be a transition from providing labouring jobs to value-added," said Jim Green, a US agriculture department advisor in Arghandab.

"The improvement in crops needs to have back-up. When people go from pruning and spraying to packing the fruit, then it becomes sustainable on a yearly basis.

"When there's demand for a product, then it becomes sustainable," he said, noting the popularity of pomegranates as a super-fruit in the West.

For Haji Mohammad, sustainability depends on security.

"As long as coalition forces are here we will be OK," he said.

"When the Afghan government and the Taliban sit down and talk there will be no fighting. For 30 years we have had fighting. We don't want any more fighting. We want to feed ourselves and get on with our lives.

"We just want peace," he said. *(By Lynne O'Donnell/ AFP)*