

U.S. Hires Afghan Farmers to Hold Off Taliban

By YAROSLAV TROFIMOV

May 18, 2010 - BABA SAHEB, Afghanistan— Dozens of goggle-clad laborers converged at the Lalay family orchard at dawn, spraying pomegranate trees with soap water against parasites.

They were paid by U.S. taxpayers, as are tens of thousands of laborers across southern Afghanistan who have been put to work in a \$360 million program—one of the biggest yet—aiming to suppress the insurgency in the Taliban's cradle.

Afghanistan Vouchers for Increased Production in Agriculture, or AVIPA Plus, injects cash into villages, helping farmers with seeds, fertilizer and advice in exchange for collaboration with the Afghan government.



Travis Gartner, right, discusses farming with Lalay orchard workers.

from AVIPA, which comes up for budget renewal in August, isn't sustainable in the long term. But unless the security situation is turned around in the coming year, they add, there may not be any long-term Western aid presence here.

AVIPA has made headway in several strategic districts, including Arghandab, a lush farming belt north of Kandahar city.

"What AVIPA did is provide massive employment. It showed that there is a carrot—and that to receive that carrot you need to make an effort and reach out to the district government," says Kevin Melton, the U.S. Agency for International Development field program manager in Arghandab. Last fall, district Gov. Hajji Abdul Jabbar would drive up to his office from Kandahar city two or three times a week, idle a few hours, and then return home. He had no authority and few locals bothered to visit him.

Kandahar and Helmand, the southern provinces where the bulk of this money is spent, are the focus of this year's U.S. military surge that seeks to roll back Taliban advances.

In recent months, as the military pushed back the insurgents, the AVIPA program helped jumpstart the economy and prop up Afghan authorities. The program doesn't always work: in some Taliban-heavy areas, such as Marjah, in Helmand province, villagers often spurn American aid for fear of Taliban reprisal.

U.S. officials also say disbursing large amounts of cash and supplies

Then, the AVIPA money suddenly rendered him relevant. To get cash and aid, village elders must first pledge to cooperate with Mr. Jabbar against insurgent attacks in their area, and coordinate implementation of the program with his office.

As more American money flowed in, the crowds grew bigger at the shuras, or meetings, at the governor's office on a compound that he shares with the U.S. military. At a recent shura, attended by representatives of villages where the Taliban maintain an active presence, elders demanded more and more aid. AVIPA is spending \$23 million in Arghandab, home to 50,000 people.

"This provides leverage: the locals have to provide some security or otherwise they'll lose the economic stimulus," says Lt. Col. Guy Jones, commander of the U.S. Army unit responsible for Arghandab, the 2nd Battalion of the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment.

In the previous three years, he adds, insurgent attacks in Arghandab peaked in mid-May. This year so far, despite occasional attacks, the area hasn't seen a similar surge. "Nowadays, when someone shows up from Pakistan and says, here is 5,000 afghanis (\$100), go plant a bomb, people won't listen anymore: they already have jobs," the district governor says.

AVIPA, which is implemented by Virginia-based International Relief and Development under a USAID contract, usually pays Afghan laborers \$5 a day.

"Before, we never saw an aid program of such scope," said Abdul Hai, a village elder who came to watch the work in the Lalay orchard before going to a shura. Wiry youngsters climbed the trunks with scissors, pruning dead branches. Underneath, turbaned workers excavated the soil to plant saplings. "We're full of hope that we'll increase our harvests this year." "Look at these trees now—last year all you'd see around this time were dead branches, bird nests, and rotting leaves."

New techniques and supplies provided by AVIPA can increase yields by some 30%, significantly increasing revenue, translating into thousands of dollars in additional revenue per hectare, according to Travis Gartner, a Nebraska farmer and former Marine who oversees the program in south Afghanistan.

Parts of the program—such as the orchard pruning—have provided the coalition forces with a direct tactical benefit, denying the Taliban, who use Arghandab's orchards as staging areas, the concealment of overgrown vegetation.

"The Taliban told the people—don't prune the trees, we need this cover against the helicopters. But the people said no, you've already cost us enough money," says Maj. William Black, the 2nd battalion's executive officer. The Taliban, seeing AVIPA as a threat, have assassinated village elders and farmers who benefit from the program, and attacked a compound of International Relief and Development compound in Helmand. Even the Lalay family, whose farm sits just a few hundred yards from an American base, has received Taliban orders to reject American money. Because so many other Arghandab farmers already participate in AVIPA, however, the family has mustered courage to defy the insurgents.

"The Taliban come at night and insist: 'don't take any benefits from the foreigners and the government,' " says Dad Mohammad, an elder from a village near the Lalay orchard. "But our economy is farming, and we have nothing else here. There is at least one person from every family in the village working on these projects. The Taliban can't stop us."