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Economic growth, jobs are secret to Afghan win

By Gloria Galloway
From Wednesday's Globe and Mail

'Historically, that's what has been necessary for democracy and human rights'

If there is an endgame for foreign forces in this turbulent country, international groups - both civilian and military - say it is to instill Afghans with the will to fight for those things they do not want to give up.

For some members of the local population, the object worth defending may be simple security - a commodity in dwindling supply in recent years.

For others, especially in Kabul, it may be the financial ability to provide their families with the trappings of a relatively modern existence.

"Economic growth and jobs are what's going to do it," says Mike Capstick, a former Canadian colonel who commanded a team of Canadian military personnel that worked inside the Afghan government to help create the skeleton of a bureaucracy and to foster development.

"You are starting to see now the development of an Afghan middle class that looks like a middle class. Historically, that's what has been necessary for democracy and human rights," said Mr. Capstick, who is now the country director for Peace Dividend Trust, a non-profit group that promotes private enterprise in war-torn countries.

Those with regular employment - whose children go to school, who can buy cars and kitchen appliances, who are fuelling the building boom in Afghanistan's largest city - do not want to go back to Taliban days. They will resist the insurgency, Mr. Capstick said.

The middle class, at this point, is largely confined to Kabul - a city that is at once medieval and modern, where donkey carts and flocks of sheep co-exist with contemporary office towers, computer shops and ubiquitous cellphones.

But there are efforts being made, with the same intent, to enrich the lives of Afghans in the rural parts of the country, a population whose support will be decisive in the nation-building efforts. And there is anecdotal evidence that these projects, by opening up opportunity for locals, are helping to stiffen resistance to the Taliban.

Four years ago, the Calamtar collection of 16 villages in the Dand district of southwest Kandahar elected a 13-

member community development council to decide how to best spend funds made available by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. The council decided what was needed, hired contractors, and saw the ventures through to completion.

"We have done many projects like making schools, wells, roads, and cleaning streams," said Haji Hayatullah, the deputy head of the district. These are worth defending, he said, and "the people help with security."

Serge Labbé, a former Canadian brigadier-general who was also part of the military team that worked inside the Afghan government and who now works for the rural development ministry, said the program is successful because it is run entirely by Afghans.

"Empowered communities are where we see spontaneous human security developing," Mr. Labbé said. "Empowered communities are communities where the people are willing to stand up against the Taliban and say 'this is a school that we built and we contributed to ... and, as a result, you are not going to touch it.'"

After decades of war, the people of Afghanistan are distrustful of foreign armies. They say the police are corrupt. And they have little faith in their own government and its institutions. But they will defend what they have built themselves.

The International Security Assistance Force has sanctioned a program that sees men in isolated villages, where the presence of foreign troops would merely draw Taliban, provide their own security on a local level. In return for keeping the insurgents at bay, the villages are quietly provided with international money for projects like schools and wells.

It has become trite here to quote the maxim that security equals development and development equals security. And, there is a growing fatigue with war.

Mr. Capstick and his staff spend their days matching Afghan companies who can provide international forces with materials they need. So far, Peace Dividend Trust, which is largely funded by the Canadian International development Agency, has co-ordinated more than \$350-million in contracts that have created about 2,000 steady jobs.

"For example, there's a guy here in Kabul that produced PVC pipe up to international standards. There's a half-dozen companies producing solar power systems. There's all kinds of stuff," Mr. Capstick said.

"You don't have a lot of well-educated people, you have the persistent security situation," he said. "But what you have is a population that wants to get on with it, the young people especially."

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