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# THE SARPOSA PRISON BREAK

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Captain Nils N. French

At roughly 2130 hrs on Friday June 13<sup>th</sup>, Taliban fighters executed a raid on Kandahar's Sarposa prison. The operation began when a large truck loaded with explosives was used to destroy the prison's main gate. An individual wearing an explosive vest later destroyed a portion of another barrier. Following the explosions, at least 30 Taliban fighters, on motorcycles surged into the prison in a hail of RPG and small arms fire, killing at least nine of the prison's Afghan security staff.<sup>1</sup> According to Taliban claims, a number of roadblocks were emplaced just prior to the jail break to prevent interference from security forces.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 1,100 prisoners, as many as 400 of them Taliban fighters,<sup>3</sup> escaped on foot into the surrounding orchards and into a fleet of minibuses that were standing by. Within days, Taliban fighters and some of the new escapees moved north into the fertile Arghandab district; supposedly occupying several villages,<sup>4</sup> destroying bridges, and mining roads leading into the area.<sup>5</sup> First completing a search of the Kandahar City that located roughly twenty escapees, Afghan and NATO forces next moved quickly to mount an offensive into the area and regain control. At time of writing, an estimated one hundred fighters have been killed or captured in the operation and the remainder are suspected of having moved north into rougher terrain.<sup>6</sup>

## A Closer Look

The nature of the attack suggests that preparation likely started several months prior to the actual event. Of particular note was a well publicized hunger strike undertaken by several of the Taliban detainees in May. The strike was to protest against alleged instances of torture within the prison and in some instances prisoners had sewn their mouths shut to demonstrate their commitment. As there have been reports that the detainees in the prison were communicating by cellular phone with others outside to coordinate the attack,<sup>7</sup> the hunger strike may have been conducted with a view to building support within the community for the upcoming escape.<sup>8</sup>

Such support would have been necessary. Analysis of the blast site indicates that roughly two tonnes of home-made explosives were used in the attack<sup>9</sup> and consideration of the numbers required to make the bomb, assemble a 30-man motorcycle assault force, gain access to several minibuses, man the exfiltration team and handle the establishment of a cordon of roadblocks in the surrounding area would suggest that more than 100 people were required overall. Given the scope, significant degrees of support and acquiescence may have been required to covertly prepare and stage the equipment for the attack as well and infiltrate the fighters into the area undetected. A degree of sympathy (and likely coercion) would also help explain the rapid dispersal of the escapees into the city and surrounding region afterwards, including the exfiltration of a dozen or so escapees that were reported to have escaped into Pakistan within 24 hours of the event.<sup>10</sup>

As is to be expected in Afghanistan, a degree of insider involvement is likely. This may have been used to ensure the arrival of the water truck carrying the explosives coincided with an actual scheduled visit,<sup>11</sup> that a minimum number of security personnel were present, and that other arrangements were made to increase the success of the operation.



Characteristics of Sarposa may have played an element in its selection as a target for the operation. First, it is widely known that there have been numerous inevitable challenges in developing Afghan security forces. These are the forces that were guarding the prison and, given a number of competing priorities, they were also limited in number. Second, and as has been brought to light in the Canadian press, the prison

seems to have presented physical weaknesses from a security standpoint. In particular, the chief corrections officer in Kandahar recommended that the first priority at Sarposa be on securing the perimeter of the institution in February of 2007.<sup>12</sup> Although funding for reconstruction is limited and there are numerous competing projects and priorities in the area, it is to be noted that roughly \$1.5 million has been spent to improve the prison. It would seem, however, that such expenditures are relatively minor when compared to the \$20 million that was spent expanding Pol-i-Charki prison outside of Kabul<sup>13</sup> or expenditures used to secure the prison at Bagram airbase. Another factor is the location of the prison relative to the NATO base at Kandahar airfield, which is more than 30 minutes away with Kandahar City located between the two. It is likely that those planning the raid were aware of the above factors.

## Insurgent Prison Breaks: A Brief History

Prison breaks have been used as an insurgent tactic on other occasions. Examples from the last few years include the release of 23 prisoners from a jail in Yemen in February of 2006,<sup>14</sup> 33 prisoners from a prison in Muqadiyah, Iraq in March of 2006,<sup>15</sup> 49 prisoners from a prison in Cotabato, Philippines in February of 2007,<sup>16</sup> and 300 freed from a facility in Chattisgarh, India in December, 2007.<sup>17</sup>

Although it was unsuccessful, an April 2005 attack mounted on Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq was conducted in a manner similar to Sarposa: the use of preliminary rocket attacks elsewhere to draw attention away from the event, the conduct of the attack under the cover of darkness, the detonation of two large suicide bombs (including vehicle-borne devices) used in an attempt to breach the main gate, and the involvement of several dozen insurgents with rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and other light weapons. At the time, Abu Ghraib was guarded by a company of US Marines. The defending force did sustain casualties, but none of the prisoners escaped.<sup>18</sup>

With the exception of the event in India, all of these were conducted by either al Qaeda directly or by organizations in some way linked to the global organization. In this instance, the link between al Qaeda and the Taliban, which brought the Canadian Forces



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to Afghanistan to begin with, may have been a key element in the planning and execution of the attack. As Kandahar Governor Asadullah Khalid has indicated, the attack was too sophisticated to have been carried out by local insurgents.<sup>19</sup>

Stratfor, a US-based strategic analysis group, has noted that both al Qaeda and jihadists in general place an emphasis on freeing their captured comrades.<sup>20</sup> On the part of al Qaeda this likely relates, in some way, to the organization's top two leaders having both been imprisoned themselves. Bin Laden was held under house arrest by the Saudi government during the First Gulf War and Ayman al-Zawahiri was imprisoned and brutally tortured in Egypt following the assassination of President Anwar El Sadat.

Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman, commonly referred to as 'the Blind Sheikh,' is another example of this emphasis on freeing captured allies. He is known to have planned and even conducted surveillance of a prison in New York with a view to freeing a member of his organization that was to be tried for murder. Although not carried out, a truck bombing followed by an armed assault was the basis of his plan.<sup>21</sup>

Events of this type have also occurred in Afghanistan. January of 2006 saw the escape of seven Taliban fighters from the Pol-i-Charki prison near Kabul (a complex that was actually seized by the Taliban in 1996<sup>22</sup>) and October of 2005 saw the escape of 'the Bagram Four' from the heavily guarded prison at Bagram Airbase.<sup>23</sup> Even Sarposa prison itself has had this happen before: in October of 2003 there was an escape of 41 Taliban prisoners through a tunnel dug underneath the complex.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, a massive explosion involving a propane tanker at Pol-i-Charki earlier in June of this year may have been a failed prison break attempt.<sup>25</sup>

Other insurgencies have had their share of similar operations, but a full list will not be included here. In fact, the addition of IRA prison breaks would add roughly a dozen more. Although no two prison breaks are the same, certain common elements underlie all of them and they will likely remain an insurgent tactic in the years to come.

## **Possible Effects**

To date, some domestic comments in the media initially referred to the Sarposa prison break as a setback that will not raise the threat level to soldiers in theatre nor bring about any likely strategic impact. Commanders on the ground have more accurately expressed the possible threat increase that may result and have communicated plans to respond accordingly. While there is a reasonable possibility that the event can be mitigated so that only minor problems arise, there may still be a possibility for effects worthy of consideration.

First, Sarposa quite possibly held the largest prison population in Afghanistan, nearly twice that of the facility at Bagram Airbase. In numbers alone, the attack may have significance. It has also been stressed in the media that only a portion of the escaped prisoners were Taliban. This may be true, but those that were not members of the Taliban when incarcerated now owe the organization for their escape. Another possible concern is that, as fugitives, they will not easily be able to seek legal employment and may be forced to consider joining the insurgency as one of the few viable options. The escapees may temper the will to fight amongst other insurgents and also attempt to turn the local population against the government by relaying accounts of torture and other mistreatment (true or not). It is also to be considered that a number of the escapees, if allegations of torture and mistreatment are valid, may be motivated by revenge.

Colin Kenny, Head of the Canadian Senate Commission on Security and National Defence has stated that the Taliban has achieved a moral boost in that the break tells



current and would-be militants that even if they are captured, “we’ll get you out.”<sup>26</sup> This may be accurate. Other victories on the moral plane include the significance of a success so close to one of ISAF’s largest bases and against a significant symbol of government. The attack may also leave the local population with less confidence in the capacity of coalition and local forces to protect them from not only the Taliban, but from common criminals as well.

There are, however, some positive aspects that have arisen as result of the incident. To date, NATO has played the IO game well and has carefully addressed the event itself and the events that followed in Arghandab and other areas. With respect to the operation to push back and regain control of areas occupied following the escape, NATO and Afghan forces wisely avoided a Fallujah-like response to the clear provocation that ensued north of the Arghandab. The conduct of the operation is commendable when looked at from a counter-insurgency perspective. Evidence of this comes from Globe and Mail reporter Graeme Smith, who has been very forthcoming in reporting on heavy-handed tactics, civilian casualties, and collateral damage in recent years. Smith indicates that the push into the area north of Kandahar relied on “an influx of 1,400 Afghan soldiers instead of aerial bombings, and few civilian casualties were reported.”<sup>27</sup> This approach represents a marked improvement and exactly what is required.

Also relevant, General Hillier is absolutely correct in his mention of the positive aspects represented by the expanded capacity of the Afghan Army as witnessed during the operation.<sup>28</sup> The mentoring and liaison teams deserve considerable credit for their gains at such a challenging task. It should also be mentioned, however, that there is a possibility the minimal defence mounted by the Taliban was, in part, a delay tactic designed to enable Taliban forces to escape into areas further north while Afghan and NATO forces carefully mounted the operation into the Taliban-held area.

## Recommendations

From such a distance, it would be unreasonable to make any significant tactical comments on the event and its follow-on operations and an initial analysis does not suggest any major tactical recommendations regardless. It is reasonable to say that Sarposa was a vulnerable point, but it must be stressed that it was one of many vulnerable points in the area. It could be suggested that Canadian troops should have been defending the prison, but this is likely not an option under current Canadian policy and if the 2005 attack on Abu Ghraib (which almost resulted in a few escapes) gives any

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suggestion, even a full company may have been insufficient. Thinking troop-to-task, a full company would represent a significant portion of coalition forces and would draw needed troops away from core missions.

It could also be said that physical security could have been more robust, but as has been mentioned, the prison was likely one of several competing reconstruction priorities in the area and the capacity for reconstruction is limited. It is also likely that the tendency of NATO and Canadian policymakers to avoid matters related to detainees has had an influence on how much funding was allocated to improve the facility.

As has been suggested by leaders in the media, better intelligence may have provided early warning. Ideally, such information should come through contacts within the local population, and depends on the numerous components of the practice of the counter-insurgency as a whole over several years. As a result, the intelligence component is too broad to be discussed in detail here. What deserves mention, however, is what seems to be a general shift in Kandahar from vehicle patrols toward foot patrols. This shift is suggested by recent deaths in theatre, most of which occurred dismounted. This is in line with counter-insurgency best practices and will, over time, improve intelligence significantly. The increased reluctance to use heavy weaponry as observed during the push into Arghandab is also a positive shift and will lead to similar gains over the long term. What seems to be an increased involvement of local forces will also bring positive gains.

If the Sarposa raid does offer any suggestions or points for improvement, these would be on the strategic end of the spectrum. The attack is actually just one of many problems related to the detainee issue, an issue that has seen the front pages of Canadian newspapers more frequently and caused more discussion than any single other, with human rights issues most prevalent. The solution may be a NATO move toward greater responsibility for detainees. At the same time or even without changes within NATO, Canada and the Canadian Forces may wish to consider a shift in policy toward accepting greater responsibility itself. This would require, at both the alliance and national levels, the development of an increased expertise in the military police branch, the operation (and fully-funded construction, if necessary) of our own detention facilities in theatre, and solid, current doctrine and policy on the matter. A certain point against such an approach is that local government and local forces will only learn if allowed to handle matters on their own. Sarposa may have suggested a need for more balance with respect to this idea. Perhaps a shift from mentors and observers from Corrections Canada to facilities well-staffed by specialized CF personnel with an expertise in corrections would be more reasonable. These experts would conduct a long right-seat-ride with local forces as competency rises to standard. There are certain legal challenges accompanying increased responsibility as well, this is certain, but as such a shift is in the interest of all involved, such challenges should be surmountable.

In terms of how things could be done and when dealing with insurgencies in particular, detainee facilities should resemble domestic correctional facilities where training, education, rehabilitation, and even amnesty are provided in conjunction with careful assessment of the prisoner in question. Vital throughout will be an approach that criminalizes insurgent activity in the public eye. This is the approach that the US military has started taking in Iraq and the results have been very promising, making detainee operations more of an enabler than a burden.

A shortage of resources is often one of the primary reasons suggested for a different approach having been taken by NATO and Canadian policymakers on the detainee issue. It seems, however, that Canada's own experience in Somalia and our observation of the incidents that unfolded within the walls of Abu Ghraib and the beating and death

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of a detainee in British custody in Basra have brought about a certain resistance to the acceptance of what looks to be perceived as an unacceptable strategic risk. The same seems true of NATO. Sarposa may have shown that while there are risks that accompany a robust detainee program, there are also risks accompanying the more hands-off approach.

## Conclusion

The recent history of insurgency has witnessed prison breaks and attempts will likely continue as insurgents work to free their comrades from facilities the world over. Sarposa may prove to produce some negative effects as time progresses, but there has been a positive aspect in that follow-on operations into Arghandab allowed Afghan troops to prove their competency and were done in a way that avoided a heavy-handed approach in favour of a stance more in tune with good counter-insurgency practice. While no solid tactical recommendations or points for improvement have been made here, a strategic-level shift in detainee policy has been recommended. Such a shift would not only improve the security of such facilities through more competent manning and increased funding for construction and maintenance, but would also help shed many of the human rights concerns that have been recently encountered. Manoeuvre commanders facing insurgencies are presented with and will always be presented with staggering challenges. The detainee issue should be addressed at the strategic level in such a way that they can rely on the matter to be fully resourced and managed by specially trained experts they can trust.

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## About the Author...

Captain Nils N. French, Canadian Military Engineers, is currently the Canadian Army Exchange Instructor to the US Army Engineer School at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Captain French graduated from the Royal Military College of Canada in 2002 with a degree in Civil Engineering. He is currently completing a Masters of Military Studies in Unconventional Warfare from American Military University, focusing his studies on counter-insurgency. Over the past two years, Captain French has published work with the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre, Small Wars Journal, the Canadian Army Journal, and the US Army Engineer Professional Bulletin. He has also presented at symposiums of the Conference of Defence Associations Institute, the International Studies Association, and the Canadian Institute for International Affairs. He would like to thank Mrs. Sharon Swain of the Fort Leonard Wood Military Library for her assistance in researching this topic, Professor Geoff Shaw for his continued broad-spectrum thoughts, and a number of esteemed NATO colleagues for their input on detainee operations and the writing of the article in general.

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