

The Power of a Tea Party

Soldiers' Tea Date Aids Ties Along Afghan Border

The Wall Street Journal

Wednesday, July 9, 2008

By Michael M. Phillips

Never underestimate the power of a tea party.

“Arandu, Pakistan. One morning last week, U.S. Army Lt. Coll. Chris Kolenda walked out of Afghanistan’s rough-and-tumble North West Frontier Province and had tea with his counterparty from the Pakistani army.

“Insurgents use Pakistan as a launching pad for attacks into Afghanistan, and Col. Kolenda, commander of 500 American soldiers on the Afghan side of the border, had been trying for almost 15 months to set up a face-to-face meeting to ask the Pakistanis to crack down on the fighters.

“Relations are tense between Pakistan and Afghanistan, with the U.S. caught somewhere in the middle. The lawless border region is one source of Afghanistan’s increasing instability, and a recent spate of violence has sparked a war of words between the two neighbors. On the front lines, it’s up to commanders like Col. Kolenda to navigate the increasing tension, even it means discussing only mundane things.

“The Afghans intended to host the Pakistanis at a lunch at a nearby police station. It quickly became apparent that the Pakistanis also wanted to play host.

“At 8 AM, the Afghans raised their gate, and the Pakistanis raised theirs. Col. Kolenda and his group walked into Arandu, a quiet village on the Pakistani side. Troops led them to a grassy compound. Col. Kolenda took off his heavy body armor and helmet, a trusting gesture. The guests sat down in a cool, whitewashed room, where a Pakistani soldier served them lemon soda with folded paper napkins.

“They pored over a Pakistani map that identified passes where militants operate and discussed problems with flying into unauthorized air space.

“The Pakistanis then invited the Americans and Afghans to the next room for tea, cakes, French fries and battered vegetable pakora. Everyone posed for pictures.

“Walking back to Afghanistan, Maj. Mahboob, the Afghan commander, considered the promises made: “The Afghans are honest with their neighbors,” he said. “In the past, the Pakistanis haven’t been honest with us. Let’s hope that will change.””

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