

## **Gurkhas Win Hearts and Minds**

**Author:** [Wahidullah Amani](#)

Nepalese troops made to feel at home as they patrol outskirts of Kabul.

The citizens of Alokhel might be fasting for Ramadan, but such is their joy at seeing international peacekeepers on patrol that they attempt to hand them food and cups of sweet tea.

Nadir Khan, 81, tells the four Gurkha soldiers whom IWPR are accompanying on foot patrol that locals used to attack Russian troops during the Soviet occupation, but these peacekeepers from the International Security Assistance Force, ISAF, are welcome.

"A Russian couldn't walk on this street, we were throwing stones, but you have brought security," he said.

This sprightly man can remember many forces passing through the Bagrami district just east of Kabul, which was a battleground both during the factional fighting of the early Nineties and the later Taleban period.

And he is not alone in his welcome of ISAF troops.

In scenes that will be appreciated back at NATO headquarters as ISAF prepares to extend its mandate to other centres, village elders offered profuse greetings to the Gurkhas trudging the muddy streets with heavy backpacks, helmets, flak jackets, and automatic weapons by their side.

Shopkeepers are quick to respond to the Nepalis' questions on local and security issues, and their answers are carefully noted down. Children swarm around the peacekeepers whenever they stop.

There is, however, some confusion about exactly where these short, stocky men come from. "Chinese? Chinese?" people cry as they pass.

Discovering that, through a shared love of Indian movies, they are able to communicate in a pidgin form of Urdu is a great source of excitement.

Lieutenant Badlabh Rai, an officer in the 200-strong Gurkha force who are in Afghanistan as part of the British contingent, says that he has constantly met this sort of kindness since arriving in the country four weeks ago.

He says the Gurkhas have developed a good relationship with local police, with whom they work closely if there are local disturbances. Their main role has been to promote a sense of security through patrols, and to act as eyes and ears on the ground.

The only really threatening incident Lt. Badlabh Rai has been involved in was when his men raided an apartment in the centre of Kabul, netting around 50 guns, after a tip-off.

Though Alokhel lies only a few kilometers from the capital, it is a completely different world.

Most of the large village's 2,500 families survive through farming and in the cold weather they share their mud-brick homes with goats, sheep and cows.

It is now a relatively stable area, but nearly all the locals spoken to by IWPR would welcome more ISAF patrols.

The real concerns, mentioned again and again, are to do with the poor infrastructure, and there is a desperate hope that international forces can do something to help.

Tired of the continued feuding among their own country's leadership, the people here place huge expectations on the capital's 5,000 international peacekeepers.

"ISAF should take on full responsibility for the next constitution and the Loya Jirga," one local man told IWPR.

Another called on the peacekeepers to aid local reconstruction. "We don't have electricity in the village... we are short of about 500 metres of cable," he said, adding hopefully, "If ISAF cooperates in laying these cables they can patrol in the light."

Lance-Corporal Damber Rai, who is leading the patrol, say they are taking note of local concerns and passing them on to the relevant United Nations and humanitarian bodies.

In the meantime, local children must make do with scrambling for sweets thrown from the patrol's vehicle as it heads back to the British base, Camp Souter.

Outside the secondary school, watchman Jan Agha, who sits in a wheelchair having lost both his legs to a mine, is left clutching a bottle of mineral water presented to him by the soldiers.

"We are happy to have ISAF forces," he told IWPR. "We just want ISAF to increase the patrols."

Wahidullah Amani is an independent journalist in Kabul.

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