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Spy Balloons Become Part of the Afghanistan Landscape, Stirring Unease

By GRAHAM BOWLEY

KABUL, Afghanistan — The traders crouched beneath the walls of an old fort, hunkered down with the sheep and goats as they talked, eyes nervously flitting up from time to time at the blimp that has become their constant overseer.

“It is there every day except the days when it is windy and rainy,” said Suleman, 45, who goes by only one name.

“It watches us day and night,” said another trader, Mir Akbar, 18, his eyes following the balloon as its nose swiveled with the wind from east to west.

“I notice it all the time,” said Rahmat Shah, 28, a secondhand car seller, who was standing slightly aside from the other men. “I know there is a camera in it.”

The dirigible, a white 117-foot-long surveillance balloon called an aerostat by the military, and scores more like it at almost every military base in the country, have become constant features of the skies over Kabul and Kandahar, and anywhere else American troops are concentrated or interested in.

Shimmering more than 1,500 feet up in the daytime haze, or each visible as a single light blinking at night, the balloons, with infrared and color video cameras, are central players in the American military’s shift toward using technology for surveillance and intelligence.

In recent years, they have become part of a widening network of devices — drones, camera towers at military bases and a newer network of street-level closed-circuit cameras monitoring Kabul’s roads — that have allowed American and Afghan commanders to keep more eyes on more places where Americans are fighting.

The dirigibles are now such a common feature in daily Afghan life that some people here shrug and say they hardly notice them. Other parts of the network have become lasting parts

of the urban landscape as well, particularly in Kabul, where long-necked closed-circuit cameras overlook locations susceptible to attacks, like the Supreme Court building, traffic circles and main highways past the military camps.

But other Afghans describe a growing sense of oppression, the feeling that even as the Americans are starting to pack up to leave, the foreigners' eyes will always be on them.

It is often expressed in typically Afghan fashion, as a grumbled undercurrent of quips and brooding pronouncements: "It is an American kite," or "Afghans and Americans are up there." (They are not; there is no one in the balloons.) "It shows us that, sure, the Americans are still here," and, "It is not effective because there are still these suicide attacks and car bombs."

For others, the cameras are an outrageous intrusion into private lives, putting women and children on display for foreigners whom they see as immoral.

"We cannot sleep on our rooftops anymore," said Mohammadullah, who goes by one name, a resident of Asadabad, the capital of Kunar Province, where families regularly sleep on their roofs during the summer's sweltering heat, and who was voicing a common concern. "Whenever our female family members walk in the yard during the day, or whenever we want to say 'hi' to our wife when we sleep on rooftops, we feel someone is watching us."

First used in Iraq in 2004, the helium balloons were introduced to Afghanistan in 2007, and the military has been shipping them here ever since.

American commanders love them, for giving them a perpetual full-color view of important thoroughfares and helping to catch insurgents planting roadside bombs. They cost less than the multimillion-dollar drones that get headlines.

"It has been a game changer," said Ray Gutierrez, who trains the civilian crews, all Americans, who operate the cameras, and the military units who use them. One recent afternoon, he stood in the small control room beneath the old fort where two men with joysticks scanned close-up views of the hillsides several miles away, practically as if they could reach out and touch them. "It lets us see the battlefield as we have never been able to see it before."

For the Taliban, the blimps have become things to fear.

In Kandahar Province — where there are at least eight in the city of Kandahar alone and more in the districts — residents say the insurgents call them "frogs" because their big eyes are ever watchful, or "shameless" because there is nothing they will not peer into. (The

residents in Helmand have their own name for them: “milk fish” because of their fins and milky color.)

The insurgents avoid the areas under the balloons and have taken to disguising themselves as farmers to avoid detection — and a deadly follow-up airstrike, residents say.

In the Zhare district of Kandahar Province, a focus of the Obama administration’s troop increase in 2010, at least one aerostat can be seen from almost every village. While bigger ones float over cities like Kabul, smaller balloons, about 75 feet, tend to be used in outlying areas.

Beyond just seeing the Taliban, the aerostats deter them, too, making ambushes rarer along routes in their view, the Americans say.

“We can’t be fighting for these roads every day,” said Col. Brian Mennes, the commander of Fourth Brigade Combat Team of the 82nd Airborne Division, which is responsible for Zhare and neighboring Maiwand district.

The street cameras in Kabul have had a similarly positive effect, officials say.

Inside the police headquarters in downtown Kabul one recent morning, Gen. Mohammad Ayoub Salangi, the chief of police, was flicking through images of the city piped onto a screen beside his desk.

General Salangi said the cameras played an important role in handling the riots in February when the burning of Korans by American military personnel touched off angry protests. The police were praised for swiftly bringing the crowds under control, especially in the east of Kabul, and keeping violence to a minimum.

“Seventy percent of that was down to the cameras,” he said. “We were watching, and the cameras helped us to find out where we had to have antiriot units.”

It was also the cameras, he said, that spied a car packed with explosives in the ground floor of a building that was under construction, from which heavily armed insurgents were attacking the American Embassy and NATO headquarters in September. “What I did, I told my strike force to stand by and we sent our emergency team in to defuse it,” he said.

Though the balloons may not stay after the last American combat troops are gone — that is still being negotiated — they will have an even more important role amid the withdrawal of military forces, as planners hope the technology will help a dwindling force stay effective.

And the military is building a bigger, 300-foot, untethered airship with more powerful surveillance capabilities intended for use here.

In the meantime, the Americans have mounted a publicity campaign devised to reassure Afghans that the cameras are not spying on women or children, and cannot peer through walls. But while some resent the intrusion, still others complain that the main problem is the cameras are not doing enough.

Sayed Agha, a resident of Asadabad, said he was in court recently where three Afghan fuel contractors were on trial for unloading American fuel tankers to private vendors in the local market. When the contractors denied the allegations, the Americans showed video images captured from a balloon.

“It was really bright and clear, as if someone followed them and filmed them while they were selling the fuel in the market,” he said. “But it raises one question, that how come they could see the fuel contractors selling fuel in the market but not the armed opposition?”

The program is clearly not infallible, nor is it invulnerable. From time to time, Afghanistan’s summer winds and storms snap the balloons’ tethers. And then there is the target practice.

Often when crews bring the balloons down, for maintenance or to protect them from storms, says Eddy Hogan, who manages the aerostats, they find bullet holes all over, attesting to the balloons’ role as an object of resentment.

The balloons’ size, and the fact that helium is not explosive, means they can stay aloft even with lots of small holes in them.

“You can tell when, you bring it down and see hundreds of bullet holes in it, that they don’t like it,” he said. But, he added, “It takes hundreds and hundreds of rounds to bring them down.”

Matthew Rosenberg and Taimoor Shah contributed reporting from Kandahar, Afghanistan, and Afghan employees of The New York Times from Kunar, Nangarhar, Kunduz and Helmand Provinces.