



Canadian helping spur development in Afghanistan

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CTV.ca News Staff

A veteran Canadian aid worker is braving the serious security threats of southern Afghanistan and trying to help villagers in the region better their lives.

"It's really critical to establish the economic infrastructure -- jobs, jobs, jobs," Drew Gilmour of Development Works Canada told CTV News. "Water is life, but providing opportunity jobs and training -- well, that makes life worth living."

Gilmour's private-sector work with Marjbuobod -- one poor, dry community outside Kandahar City -- did start with water.

"They said, 'We have seen a thousand people come and go, but prove to us you are serious,' and we asked them, what, and they said water," he said.

Gilmour responded by first digging them a well.

Within a few weeks, over 200 village men had jobs. They built six more wells, and construction on an irrigation system is now well underway.

The goal is to plant fields with vegetable crops that can then be grown at market. The community's sense of hope is growing with the progress.

The Canadian International Development Agency funds Gilmour's work. They look on his effort as establishing a blueprint for how badly-needed private-sector development projects can get started in Kandahar province.

"He is operating as a pioneer," Kevin Rex, a CIDA official and development advisor to Joint Task Force Afghanistan, said of Gilmour.

However, the dangers facing anyone doing the work Gilmour does are very real.

In 2006, insurgents are believed to have murdered British Columbia resident Mike Frastacky, who was building a co-ed school in northern Afghanistan.

The Taliban think kidnappings are a good way to pressure the Afghan government. They currently hold 21 South Korean missionaries and aid workers, having killed two others.

When Gilmour leaves his Kandahar City compound, he does so with protection and after engaging in some careful planning.

"We have security procedure and I would say we are professional, and I would say there is some inherent risk that we try to minimize," he said.

But Gilmour also said the risk is worth it. "By far this is the most rewarding thing I have done in development," he said, adding his biggest reward is the smiles on the faces of village children.

He hopes to extend his efforts to a total of seven villages, and that if he succeeds, more will follow in his footsteps.

With a report from CTV's **Denelle Balfour**