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Rising tensions in war zone cause Del. families anguish

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Crystal Faulkner is doing just fine knowing her first-born son is spending a year in Afghanistan guarding convoys that rumble over its treacherous roads.

Really, she is.

Until about 10:30 p.m., that is, when her two younger children are put to bed, and the brimming-with-confidence mother has time to ponder Pfc. Tyler Faulkner's precarious situation. That's when the tears start to flow.

"I don't sleep," she said. "I cry."

Yet even as she voices unqualified pride and support for what her 21-year-old son is doing, she admits a deepening concern for his safety given the hot war zone's rising tensions.

So far, 2012 has seen the slayings of U.S. and NATO troops by, respectively, an Afghan soldier and a man wearing an Afghan National Army uniform; a viral video of Marines urinating on dead enemy fighters; riots sparked by what was termed the inadvertent burning of Qurans; the subsequent killings of two U.S. officers inside the country's Interior Ministry; and on March 11, a U.S. soldier's allegedly unprovoked killings of 16 civilians.

Many fear reprisal attacks, if not a setback for the entire 10 1/2-year effort prompted by the 9/11 terrorist strikes.

"It's a huge concern," Faulkner said. "Because we just don't know. It may have set things back from what we've accomplished.

"Hopefully, it'll get better," she said.

Vaqar Sharief fears that it won't. "I'm sure this is going to get worse," said the president of the Islamic Society of Delaware. Sharief, a Pakistani who emigrated to the United States 25 years ago, expresses a deep love for his adopted country and the freedoms it grants. Deaths of innocent civilians -- there were 3,021 conflict-

related Afghan civilian deaths in 2011, a 14 percent increase from the previous year -- are, he said, a powerful recruiting tool for the Taliban and other fundamentalist groups.

"The youth who are being involved in these things," Sharief said, "when they see an incident like this ... somebody's going to talk to them and say, 'You see what's happening? Come join us.' "

U.S. officials insist they have the initiative in Afghanistan and have vowed to stay the course. But while things cool down -- if they do -- U.S. and other NATO troops have been forced to increase their vigilance.

"There is a heightened degree of security," said Maj. Gen. Frank Vavala, commander of the Delaware National Guard, whose 1049th Transportation Company out of Seaford remains based in Balkh province for the final two months of its one-year hitch. "People aren't leaving their base camps as they did prior to this. ... This really highlights and kind of underscores that they're in a very dangerous environment. And obviously, there is an awful lot of concern, because we're very concerned about this incident providing fuel for the Taliban to retaliate."

Beyond the immediate concern over possible reprisals, some analysts posit that the shocking incident could be a final straw of sorts and represent a turning point in the war. Others, generally identified as more conservative, mirror the government's confidence that the dust will settle and that the process of developing the nation's security forces and civic functionality will allow Afghanistan to survive after the U.S. fully transitions to a training and advisory role in mid-2013.

"The protests ... certainly make the task more challenging," wrote Frederick Kagan, a defense analyst with the conservative American Enterprise Institute, in an entry on the think tank's blog. "The Afghan leadership clearly understands its need for the American presence and partnership. ... Now is the time to support our commanders and troops as they take the fight to the enemy, in partnership with the Afghan Security Forces."

Others see things going downhill.

"The training mission is premised on trust," said Malou Innocent, a foreign-policy analyst with the libertarian **Cato Institute**. "I think that trust is rapidly eroding. Going forward, we must really reassess the mission and reconcile what we want to achieve in Afghanistan and what is realistically achievable."

Another analyst said that on a macro level, the string of incidents might actually be a good thing -- for those looking for a way to end the U.S. involvement without losing face.

"In my view, we might get lucky," said Lawrence Korb, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress and an assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan administration. "In this sense, [Afghan President Hamid] Karzai says you've got to turn over the prisoners and no more [night] raids, and I want it in 2013" -- referring to Karzai's demands that the U.S. end its practice of forcibly entering homes to search for Taliban fighters, and that it turn over all responsibility for its largest prison in Afghanistan and for much of his country's security by that point, if not earlier.

"We should say, 'Hey, great! That's good!'" Korb said. "And then," he said, "nobody can say you 'cut and ran' -- you're just doing what the elected president there told you to do."

Far from the turmoil in Afghanistan, and their family members caught up in the midst of it, the families of the 1049th sit and wait.

Vavala said the state Guard has "every assurance" that military leadership is "doing everything they possibly can to ensure the safety and security of their personnel." Officials work to reassure the families, reminding them that the troops are well-trained and look after one another. Unit family readiness groups meet monthly, and leaders regularly touch base with other family members.

There's another piece of advice that's probably hard to follow: Don't pay such close attention.

"A lot of times, we tell families, you know, turn off CNN," said Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Dawn Peet, who directs family readiness programs for the state Guard. Children who associate someone in uniform with they see on TV can be particularly vulnerable, she said.

"Sometimes, too much information can be harmful ... because it stresses our families," she said.

That's Melissa Thibodeau's strategy. "I don't watch the news a whole lot," said the wife of Pfc. Cory Thibodeau of the 1049th. "But it's hard not to hear stories about what's going on." She said she and her husband communicate via email, phone calls and Skype, but said she doesn't push him for details on what he's doing "unless it's something I know is near him.

"He wouldn't tell me anyway," she said with a chuckle.

Crystal Faulkner and husband Don also talk with her son via the phone and look for Facebook posts, but she says it's sporadic. Being the mother of a deployed soldier is difficult, she says.

"Every day is another day," she said. "All I can do is worry, and hope."

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