

Business and Politics in the Muslim World

Afghanistan This Week

Report Number: 109

Week 28 Feb- 6 March 2010

March, 7, 2010

Mohammad Amin

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Political Headlines Summary

Marines, Afghan troops to be stationed in Marjah

The Associated Press

MARJAH – More than 2,000 U.S. Marines and about 1,000 Afghan troops who stormed the Taliban town of Marjah as part of a major NATO offensive against a resurgent Taliban will stay for the next several months to help ensure insurgents don't return, Marine commanders said Sunday.

2 Army majors among Indians killed in Kabul

The Asian Age

New Delhi/Kabul - A four-hour-long terrorist strike in central Kabul which began at 6.35 on Friday morning, in which an indeterminate number of Indians and possibly six others, including an Italian diplomat, a French filmmaker and local policemen, were killed, began with the attackers blasting through the entrance of the Safi Landmark Hotel, a leading establishment, and climbing to the sixth and seventh floors looking for Indian residents, Afghan sources pointed out to this newspaper.

Top general says Afghanistan army in morale crisis

The Sunday Times, UK

THE head of the army has warned that British troops are facing a crisis of deteriorating morale on the home front that risks undermining the war in Afghanistan.

Pakistan accused of playing complex game

Pajhwok

WASHINGTON - In view of the recent high profile arrests of Taliban leaders by Pakistan, which many in US consider as a major shift in Pak policies, a leading American think tank and scholars Friday said Islamabad is playing a complex game and it is too early to arrive at a definite conclusion.

Blast kills 11 civilians in southern Afghanistan

Reuters

KANDAHAR - An explosive device planted by Taliban militants killed 11 civilians on Sunday in Afghanistan's most violent province, a government official said.

Attacks kill 6 NATO troops around Afghanistan

The Associated Press

KANDAHAR — Six NATO service members died Monday in separate attacks across Afghanistan, including a suicide car bomb that targeted an international military convey as it crossed a bridge in the Taliban-dominated south, the coalition said.

Pakistan Blocks Prisoner Transfers

Wall Street Journal

ISLAMABAD — A Pakistani court has restrained the government from extraditing Afghan Taliban leaders recently detained by its intelligence services to any other country, raising the prospects of a new row between Kabul and Islamabad.

Afghan official: Pakistani group behind Kabul attacks

The Associated Press

KABUL — An Afghan intelligence official on Tuesday blamed the Pakistan-based militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba for last week's car bomb and suicide attacks that killed 16 people in the heart of Kabul.

New Kabul attack highlights Indian-Pakistani tension in Afghanistan

Deutsche Welle

The Taliban have hit again - in broad daylight, right in the center of Kabul. At least 17 people have died, among them up to nine Indian citizens according to the Indian foreign minister. The assault was carried out in a hotel frequented by Indian nationals. It raises the question once again whether the war in Afghanistan is slowly turning into more of a proxy battle between India and Pakistan.

MPs want to decide on key policies

KABUL (PAN): Concerned about the worsening security situation in the country, members of the Wolesi Jirga or Lower House of the parliament on Wednesday asked the

president Hamid Karzai to seek their approval for the fundamental policies prior to their implementation.

Afghan intelligence ties Pakistani group Lashkar-i-Taiba to recent Kabul attack

The Washington Post

KABUL - An Afghan intelligence official said Tuesday that the Pakistani militant group Lashkar-i-Taiba orchestrated the deadly attack that targeted two guesthouses in the capital last week.

Holbrooke theory on Kabul attack upsets New Delhi

Asian Tribune

New Delhi - New Delhi has reasons to be upset at the views of Richard Holbrooke, special US Representative for Pakistan and Afghanistan, who has rejected reports that the terror strikes in Kabul specifically targeted Indians.

5 Pakistani road workers shot dead in Afghanistan

The Associated Press

KANDAHAR — An Afghan official says five Pakistani road construction workers have been shot dead in the southern city of Kandahar.

U.S. military questions Karzai's steps on corruption

Reuters

WASHINGTON - Afghan President Hamid Karzai must take "significant steps" to fight corruption, the U.S. military's top officer said on Wednesday, suggesting Washington was concerned inaction could undercut the campaign against the Taliban.

Reluctant Pashtuns hamper Afghan recruitment drive

Reuters

BRUSSELS - High drop-out and low recruitment rates have hampered NATO efforts to boost security forces to control insurgents in southern Afghanistan, the U.S. general leading the effort said on Wednesday.

Charikar Angered by Security Force Presence

IWPR

US and Afghan troops agree to leave town at the request of Kabul officials.

Indian top official in Kabul to review security of citizens

KABUL (PAN): President Hamid Karzai met with Indian Prime Minister's National Security Adviser Shiv Shankar Menon on Friday and discussed with him matters of mutual interests, particularly the expansion of bilateral relations between the two countries.

New Afghan chief in Marjah has criminal record

The Associated Press

KABUL – The man chosen to be the fresh face of good Afghan governance in a town just seized from the Taliban has a violent criminal record in Germany, but Western officials said Saturday they are not pushing to oust him.

Karzai calls on Taliban to stop attacking schools

Reuters

Afghan President Hamid Karzai pleaded with insurgents on Saturday to stop attacking schools so that the five million Afghan children with no access to education can reach their potential.

Afghan Drug Trade Complicates U.S. Task in Marjah

TIME

The impetus for the U.S.-led assault on Marjah began one moonless night last May when a squad of American and Afghan anti-narcotics agents, backed by U.S. Marines, slipped through the town's empty streets and raided the Lachoya opium bazaar.

NATO asks for more Czechs in Afghanistan

Payame-Aftab

PRAGUE, Czech Republic, March 5 -- NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has asked the Czech Republic's government in Prague for more troops in Afghanistan.

Brown Pledges New Vehicles, More Trainers on Afghanistan Visit

Payame-Afatab

March 6 -- Prime Minister Gordon Brown promised more police trainers and new armored vehicles during a visit to U.K. troops in Afghanistan, a day after facing questions on his control of funding for the Iraq war.

Economic Headlines Summary

Pomegreat signs £3m a year deal to buy pomegranate juice from Afghanistan

Telegraph, UK

Pomegreat has signed a provisional agreement to buy 500 tonnes of concentrate each year from the country's first fruit juice factory, based on the outskirts of Kabul. It will also buy a further 500 tonnes of fresh pomegranates, making the deal worth £3m a year.

Building Afghanistan's Financial System

VOA

U.S. Treasury officials are working with their Afghan partners to lay the groundwork for more effective, corruption-free management of public funds.

As Afghanistan Contracting Surges, Who's Following the Money?

Huffington Post

In the past eight years, the United States has allocated \$51 billion to rebuild and stabilize Afghanistan. But tracking that money sometimes seems as challenging as finding the leaders of the Taliban.

ASA partnering in Afghanistan reconstruction

Farm Press

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has announced that the American Soybean Association's (ASA) World Initiative for Soy in Human Health (WISHH) program and three partnering organizations will receive a cooperative agreement for work in Afghanistan.

Building high-speed wireless in Afghanistan out of garbage

Boing Boing

Volunteers in Afghanistan—both locals and foreigners from the MIT Bits and Atoms lab—have been building out a wireless network made largely from locally scrounged junk. They call it "FabFi" and it's kicking ass, especially when compared with the World

Bank-funded alternative, which has spent seven years and hundreds of millions of dollars and only managed its first international link last summer.

Social Headlines Summary

Roads leading to Herat Airport open

Pajhwok Report

KABUL (PAN): The Italian Provincial Reconstruction Team opened two new roads to the Herat airport yesterday, NATO said on Saturday.

'No school for almost half of Afghan children'

AFP

KABUL – Almost half of school-age children in Afghanistan do not have access to education, President Hamid Karzai said Saturday as he inaugurated the new school year.

Afghanistan launches poppy eradication programme

AFP

KABUL - Afghanistan, source of 90 percent of the world's heroin, Wednesday announced plans to wipe out opium poppies across most of the country, starting in the south where the Taliban have long held sway.

New course to boost literacy rate of Afghan police force

03/04/2010

KANDAHAR - Classrooms in Kabul will soon be filled with Afghan cops learning their ABCs and 1-2-3s.

30 schemes completed in Sar-i-Pul

Pajhwok

MAZAR-I-SHARIF/JALALABAD - Thirty uplift schemes have been executed in northern Sar-i-Pul under the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), while work on a 25-kilometre road was launched in eastern Laghman province.

Dip in civilian deaths in first two months of 2010

IRIN

KABUL - The number of civilian deaths caused by the conflict in Afghanistan in the first two months of 2010 was slightly lower than in the same period in 2009, according to two Afghan human rights groups.

Big rise in Afghan child migrants

BBC

United Nations aid agencies are warning of a sharp increase in unaccompanied Afghan children applying for asylum across Europe.

Ministries to place ban on 'immoral websites' by May 21

Pajhwok

KABUL - The Ministry of Telecommunication and Information Technology in coordination with the Ministry of Information and Culture are going to place a ban on the websites that exclusively circulate pornography by May 21, officials said on Sunday.

Afghanistan protects newly rediscovered rare bird

The Associated Press

KABUL — Afghanistan's fledgling conservation agency moved Sunday to protect one of the world's rarest birds after the species was rediscovered in the war-ravaged country's northeast.

Tree plantation drive launched, Projects completed in Badghis, Jawzjan

Pajhwok

JALALABAD - A tree plantation campaign, covering 26 districts, has been launched in eastern provinces in cooperation with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), officials said on Saturday.

Marjah's residents wary of U.S. after Taliban ouster

McClatchy Newspapers

MARJAH — One by one, the men of Marjah tentatively approached the high-ranking Afghan official with their complaints.

Afghanistan bans coverage of Taliban attacks

Reuters

KABUL - Afghanistan on Monday announced a ban on news coverage showing Taliban attacks, saying such images embolden the Islamist militants, who have launched strikes around the country as NATO forces seize their southern strongholds.

Mullahs and religious elders tapped to promote women's rights

United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)

The Government of Afghanistan has initiated a programme tapping Mullahs and religious elders in making people aware of women's rights in accordance with Islamic laws, the Afghan institutional law and international human rights law.

Political Headlines

Marines, Afghan troops to be stationed in Marjah

The Associated Press
02/28/2010

MARJAH – More than 2,000 U.S. Marines and about 1,000 Afghan troops who stormed the Taliban town of Marjah as part of a major NATO offensive against a resurgent Taliban will stay for the next several months to help ensure insurgents don't return, Marine commanders said Sunday.

Two Marine battalions, along with their Afghan counterparts, will be stationed in Marjah and help patrol it as part of NATO's "clear, hold, build" strategy, which calls for troops to secure the area, restore a civilian Afghan administration, and bring in aid and public services to win the support of the local population, commanders said.

On Sunday, the 1,000 Marines with the 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines Regiment were fortifying positions to the north and west of the town, taking over compounds and building others from scratch to create a small garrison, known as a Forward Operating Base, as well as combat outposts and a network of temporary patrol bases, said Capt. Joshua Winfrey, head of Lima Company.

To the south of Marjah, another battalion was doing the same, Winfrey said. About 1,000 Afghan troops will accompany the Marines, he added.

Marine spokesman Capt. Abe Sipe said construction of a more permanent military outpost will facilitate a long-term NATO presence in the town.

"We are going to have a presence in Marjah for some time. There's no plans for anyone to pull out," Sipe said. "The idea is to live among the local nationals because we found that's the best way to partner with local security partners to make Afghans feel safe and not under threat."

Afghan residents in Marjah had told government officials that they preferred NATO troops to be based in the town itself, instead of being outside, to provide better security.

Winfrey said he has been told that the entire battalion expects to be stationed in Marjah until the end of its deployment in August.

Establishing a credible local government is a key component of NATO's strategy for the longtime Taliban logistical hub and drug trafficking center. Last week, the government installed a new civilian chief, and several hundred Afghan police have already begun patrolling newly cleared areas of Marjah and the surrounding district of Nad Ali.

The Marjah offensive has been the biggest military operation since the 2001 U.S.-led invasion to topple the Taliban's hard-line regime. It's the first major test of NATO's counterinsurgency strategy since President Barack Obama ordered 30,000 new American troops to try to reverse Taliban gains.

But the challenges in routing the Taliban are formidable. A team of suicide attackers struck Friday in the heart of the capital, Kabul, killing at least 16 people in assaults on two small hotels. Half of the dead were foreigners. The attack served as a reminder that the insurgents still have the strength to launch attacks — even in the capital.

On Sunday, three top police commanders in Kabul offered to resign from their posts for failing to prevent the insurgents' attack.

"We are the people responsible for the security of Kabul, we failed to provide that security and we don't want to be responsible for others dying," said Gen. Abdul Ghafar Sayedzada, the chief of Kabul's criminal investigation unit. The city's police chief and deputy police chief also offered to resign, according to the Interior Ministry.

However, the interior minister told all three to continue in their posts until an investigation is finished. At that point, he will decide whether or not to accept their resignations, said Zemer Bashary, a spokesman for the ministry.

In other violence, 11 members of one family were killed Sunday in southern Helmand province when their tractor, with a truck-bed hitched to the back, hit a roadside bomb, said provincial government spokesman Daoud Ahmadi. All aboard died, including two women and two children.

Ahmadi said the Sunday attack occurred in Now Zad district, significantly north of the area where international and Afghan forces launched their military push against the Taliban.

2 Army majors among Indians killed in Kabul

The Asian Age
02/28/2010

New Delhi/Kabul - A four-hour-long terrorist strike in central Kabul which began at 6.35 on Friday morning, in which an indeterminate number of Indians and possibly six others, including an Italian diplomat, a French filmmaker and local policemen, were killed, began with the attackers blasting through the entrance of the Safi Landmark Hotel, a leading establishment, and climbing to the sixth and seventh floors looking for Indian residents, Afghan sources pointed out to this newspaper.

Late at night the Indian embassy in Kabul confirmed six fatalities. (The Afghan interior ministry had earlier indicated that nine Indians might be among the dead.) These are Maj. (Dr) Laishram Jyotin Singh of the Army Medical Corps, attached to Kabuls famous Indira Gandhi Hospital; Maj. Deepak Yadav of the Army Education Corps, who had been despatched to teach English at the local military academy; Roshan Lal, an ITBP jawan posted at the Indian consulate in Herat who was on leave, on his way back home; Nitin Chibber, a secretary at the Indian consulate in Kandahar; engineer Bhola Ram, a project director of the Powergrid Corporation; and Nawab Khan, a tabla player visiting Kabul as part of a three-member troupe sent by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations.

The process of determining the identities of the dead and the injured is said to be continuing.

A Boeing 737 of the Indian Air Force communication squadron is being flown to Kabul on Saturday morning to bring back the deceased and the dozen or so Indians thought to be injured in the terrorist strike. There are several Indian Army officers among the injured as well, sources said.

Sources in the Afghan capital said details of the terrorist attack remained sketchy through the day, with the authorities keeping a tight control on news.

Rooms at the Park Regency and Noor, two guest houses adjacent to the Safi Landmark, which is part of the Kabul City Centre, a large modern shopping complex, had been taken up by the Indian government to house some of its personnel and visitors. The Army officers were at the Noor. After the coordinated attacks at the hotel and the two guest houses, external affairs minister S.M. Krishna said in a statement in New Delhi that this was the third attack on Indian officials and interests in Afghanistan in the past 20 months.

This is the nearest India has come to officially acknowledging on Friday that Indians were especially targeted in the dawn attack for which the Taliban has claimed responsibility.

In the earlier two attacks both on the Indian embassy in Kabul, in July 2008 and October 2009 Afghan and Indian officials, relying partly on American sources, pointed a finger at Pakistan without losing much time. On Friday, however, the Indians and the Afghans appeared to be observing restraint.

When the Afghan foreign minister Zalmay Rassoul telephoned Mr Krishna to commiserate on Friday evening, the Indian release quoted Mr Rassoul as saying that India and Afghanistan were facing a common enemy. Strongly condemning the attack, Mr Krishna responded that India firmly stood by Afghanistan in confronting their common enemy.

The reference to Pakistan is clear enough, but it is general in nature and does not link Islamabad, or more specifically the Inter-Services Intelligence, which has been blamed in the past, to the Friday attacks. Possibly this is because the sites targeted were a hotel and

guest houses not exclusively occupied by Indians, although the two guest houses had predominantly Indian guests.

With security becoming tighter at the Indian embassy in Kabul, terrorists appear to be scouting for softer targets to get at Indians whose presence in Afghanistan is viewed with irritation by Pakistan. On December 15 last year, there was an attack just outside the Heetal Hotel in the posh Wazir Akbar Khan district of Kabul. Indian engineers were living at a guest house close to the hotel but happened to be away at the time of the strike, highly-placed Indian sources said afterward.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, President Hamid Karzai, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and Nato chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen condemned the dawn attack in strong terms.

In his statement, the external affairs minister said the Kabul attack was the handiwork of those who are desperate to undermine the friendship between India and Afghanistan, and do not wish to see a strong, democratic and pluralistic Afghanistan.

The scourge of terrorism must be resolutely opposed, resisted and overcome through undiluted commitment and effort by the international community, Mr Krishna added.

In Kabul, Taliban attacks are often timed to hurt office-goers at around 8 in the morning. The attack on Friday, at dawn, and at locations that house Indians in large numbers, is seen as a significant pointer by many in Kabul, Afghan sources observed.

Top general says Afghanistan army in morale crisis

The Sunday Times, UK

02/28/2010

By David Leppard

THE head of the army has warned that British troops are facing a crisis of deteriorating morale on the home front that risks undermining the war in Afghanistan.

In a confidential draft memo prepared for ministers, General Sir David Richards, chief of the general staff (CGS), said that recent cuts to the defence budget are having a cumulative and corrosive effect on our soldiers and their families.

Cuts to housing, shortages of training equipment and even the cancellation of sports events between soldiers tours of duty were making them and their families feel undervalued, the army chief wrote.

The leaked memo will be seized on by the Tories as opening a new front in the tussle between army chiefs and ministers over the politically sensitive issue of defence cuts.

It echoes the row last year when Richards's predecessor, General Sir Richard Dannatt, stepped down after speaking out about equipment shortages as well as poor pay and conditions. It later emerged that government figures had tried to smear him over his expenses.

A senior military commander emphasised yesterday that it was not Richards's intention to criticise ministers: He's not whingeing. He's simply trying to flag up what he believes is a vital issue that needs their urgent attention.

In the memo to the defence board, which comprises ministers and service chiefs, Richards shifts the focus of criticism from the war effort in Afghanistan to the treatment of troops on their return home.

While there had been significant progress on the front line, Richards said, the treatment of soldiers when they returned for 24 months between tours is so poor that it is threatening to undermine the war effort.

Marked restricted, the memo reports a summary of an internal poll of 5,000 soldiers and their families at units in Britain, Germany and Cyprus over the past four months.

The survey was discussed at the executive committee of the army board this month. Its results appear to be so alarming that Richards decided to alert ministers to its key findings.

My greatest concern is the deteriorating experience of soldiers and their families between tours which, the [survey] team reports, is disaffecting attitudes, damaging morale and risks undermining our ability to sustain the campaign he wrote.

We need our soldiers to be ready, mentally and physically, to endure repeated tours in Afghanistan, in a harsh environment, with the real prospect of significant casualties each time.

To maintain the necessary morale and cohesion, they must see tangible signs between tours that they and their families are valued.

Last July the army was forced to make savings of £43m to help the Ministry of Defence keep within budget. In October a further £54m cut was announced so resources could be focused on the war in Afghanistan. About £14m of those cuts meant delays to upgrades to living quarters for more than 4,000 troops.

The memo says: The team reports the cumulative and corrosive effect that [such cuts] are having on our soldiers and their families.

As CGS, I register an early concern about the impact on morale, the potentially severe downstream impact on retention and our ability to sustain the campaign in the longer

term.

An army spokesman said: The report notes that soldiers feel increasingly well supported and resourced on operations and praises medical care in-theatre and in the UK.

It also relays concerns about the effect of financial pressure on activity in between operational tours and provides early warning of the resulting impact on morale. Resources are tight at the moment and Afghanistan is the main effort.

Pakistan accused of playing complex game

Pajhwok

02/28/2010

By Lalit K Jha

WASHINGTON - In view of the recent high profile arrests of Taliban leaders by Pakistan, which many in US consider as a major shift in Pak policies, a leading American think tank and scholars Friday said Islamabad is playing a complex game and it is too early to arrive at a definite conclusion.

Pakistan is playing a complex game, and one important question is the extent to which Pakistan is indeed cooperating and coordinating with the United States in a meaningful way, rather than simply making temporary or symbolic gestures, Stratfor, a US-based strategic think-tank, said.

The Pakistanis are deeply skeptical of US support in the long-run, and they already are thinking about managing Afghanistan when the United States begins to draw down there in coming years, it said in its latest news analysis with reports coming out of Pakistan that several top Taliban leaders have been arrested.

However, there is an entire chapter of history to be written before that happens, and Pakistan has every intention of being at the centre of any negotiations with the Afghan Taliban, including the talks, the reconciliation process and the implementation of a settlement, it said.

A spate of arrests like those of the Quetta Shura members regardless of whether they actually have been taken out of commission may indicate some sort of power play is taking place. But such a development cannot be confirmed presently, and Islamabad has no shortage of reasons to manipulate perceptions, Stratfor said.

Another noted US scholar a well-known expert on Afghanistan and Pakistan -- Lisa Curtis too has said it is too early to have full confidence in the sudden change in policies of Pakistan.

Given Pakistan's long track record of support to militant groups fighting in Afghanistan and India, it is too early to determine whether the most recent arrests signal a permanent reversal of its past policies, or merely a tactical shift to demonstrate its leverage in the region, said Curtis from the Heritage Foundation.

"It is unclear why Pakistan is stepping up to the plate now on cracking down on the Afghan Taliban," she said, adding that most observers believe Islamabad may be seeking to ensure it has a role in determining any potential settlement of the conflict.

"Others say it is partly a response to the US pressure. President Obama appealed directly to the Pakistanis to crack down on the Afghan Taliban through a letter hand-delivered by National Security Advisor Gen. Jones to Pakistani President Zardari last fall, Curtis said.

The letter coincided with revelations from the arrest of David C. Headley, a Pakistani-American who worked with the Lashkar-e-Tayyiba in Pakistan to scout sites for the November 2008 attacks in Mumbai, she said.

Blast kills 11 civilians in southern Afghanistan

Reuters
02/28/2010

KANDAHAR - An explosive device planted by Taliban militants killed 11 civilians on Sunday in Afghanistan's most violent province, a government official said.

The blast happened on a road in the Nawzad district of Helmand Province. The province is the focus of one of the largest NATO offensives in the eight-year-old war against the Islamist Taliban.

"A newly planted mine of the Taliban hit a coach bus, killing 11 civilians including two women and two children today," Dawud Ahmedi, spokesman for the Helmand provincial governor, said.

The Taliban had no immediate comment.

On Tuesday, authorities blamed the Taliban for setting off a remote-controlled bomb near a government building in Helmand's capital, Lashkar Gah, which killed seven people and wounded 14.

Though under pressure as NATO forces try to drive them from their strongholds, the Taliban have responded with guerrilla attacks, including one in the capital Kabul on Friday which killed 16 people in a two-hour shootout with two suicide blasts.

Violence last year hit its highest level since the Taliban were ousted by U.S.-backed Afghan forces in 2001. The militants have made a comeback and are resisting efforts by President Hamid Karzai's Western-supported government to impose control.

Attacks kill 6 NATO troops around Afghanistan

The Associated Press
03/01/2010

KANDAHAR — Six NATO service members died Monday in separate attacks across Afghanistan, including a suicide car bomb that targeted an international military convey as it crossed a bridge in the Taliban-dominated south, the coalition said.

Nine Afghan civilians also died in four bombings in the south, officials said.

The deaths came as American and Afghan forces worked to consolidate control over the former insurgent stronghold of Marjah in the southern province of Helmand, where allied forces are waging the largest combined offensive of the 8-year-old war.

Monday's suicide attacker waited in a taxi for the NATO convoy to cross the bridge between Kandahar city and the airport, then detonated his explosives, tossing a military vehicle into a ravine, said Inhamullah Khan, an Afghan army official at the site.

A NATO spokesman, Maj. Marcin Walczak, confirmed one service member died in the suicide bombing. He did not provide the nationality or any other details.

Four Afghan civilians died in the bridge attack, the Interior Ministry said. Three of the civilians who died were in a car that had pulled over nearby to wait for the convoy to cross the bridge, which the military regularly sweeps for explosives, Khan said.

In western Afghanistan, two other NATO troops died in a mortar or rocket attack, a military statement said, while another service member was killed by small arms fire in the south. One service member was killed by a roadside bomb in the south and another by rocket or mortar fire in the east. The statements gave no other details.

Another car bomb Monday outside Kandahar city's police headquarters killed a civilian employee and wounded nine police officers and six civilians, Interior Ministry spokesman Zemerai Bashary. Another official had previously said a police officer was among the dead, but Bashary said he was an office worker, not an officer.

Kandahar city is the capital of the province of the same name that is considered the spiritual birthplace of the Taliban. It lies east of Helmand province, where thousands of U.S., NATO and Afghan troops are conducting an offensive to wrest control of the town

of Marjah from insurgents.

Marjah has long been controlled by the Taliban, and the assault is seen as the first step in a multi-month offensive that will eventually target insurgent strongholds around Kandahar city.

U.S. and Afghan forces' advances in and around Marjah have been hampered by thousands of buried explosives left behind by the Taliban — roadside bombs that kill civilians as well as military forces.

On Monday, a civilian car hit one of the roadside bombs as it entered the city limits of Lashkar Gah, the major town north of Marjah. The blast killed three people, including a 10-year-old boy, said Dawod Ahmedi, spokesman for the Helmand provincial governor.

Another roadside bomb killed two employees of a construction company who were riding in a company vehicle Monday afternoon on a road north of Lashkar Gah district, an Interior Ministry statement said.

The 2-week-old Marjah offensive, involving thousands of American troops along with Afghan soldiers, is the largest combined assault since the 2001 U.S.-led invasion to oust the Taliban's hard-line Islamist regime.

It is the first test of NATO's new counterinsurgency strategy since President Barack Obama ordered 30,000 new U.S. troops to Afghanistan late last year.

The allied forces have cleared most of Marjah and are now working to secure the area, though NATO has warned there could be pockets of violence for weeks. Hundreds of Afghan police and civil servants are being brought in with the goal of establishing public services to win the support of the population.

Pakistan Blocks Prisoner Transfers

Wall Street Journal
03/01/2010
By Zahid Hussain

Islamabad Court Prevents Extradition of Several Taliban Leaders to Afghanistan

ISLAMABAD — A Pakistani court has restrained the government from extraditing Afghan Taliban leaders recently detained by its intelligence services to any other country, raising the prospects of a new row between Kabul and Islamabad.

A panel of the Lahore High Court headed by Chief Justice Khawaja Sharif ordered the government not to extradite the Taliban leaders until the court gives its decision on a petition filed by a human-rights activist, Khalid Khawaja. He had filed a petition that said the Taliban leaders were arrested in Pakistan and should be tried under Pakistani laws. The court will resume its hearing on March 15.

The decision came Friday as Afghan President Hamid Karzai in an interview with a Pakistani newspaper said his government will send a formal request to Islamabad for the extradition of Afghan Taliban leaders recently rounded up in a Pakistani sweep.

Pakistani intelligence services have seized at least six senior Afghan Taliban leaders including members of the group's leadership council also known as the Quetta Shura for the name of the western Pakistani city where most of the senior Afghan insurgent leaders are believed to be residing.

Pakistani and U.S. intelligence agencies recently arrested Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a deputy to Mullah Mohammed Omar, the supreme commander of the Afghanistan Taliban movement, in the southern port city of Karachi. His detention followed the capture of some other insurgent commanders including Mullah Abdul Kabir, a former deputy prime minister in the Afghanistan's ousted Taliban regime.

A senior Pakistani official familiar with the latest crackdown said six Taliban leaders are in the custody of Inter Services Intelligence, the country's main spy and counterterrorism body. They include Tayyab Popalzai, who is believed to be a close associate of Mullah Omar, and was recently arrested by security agencies. It isn't clear when and where he was seized.

In the interview with the News, a Pakistani newspaper, Mr. Karzai said that his government was soon going to send a formal request to Islamabad for the handover of Mullah Baradar and other detained Afghan leaders to the Afghan government.

"The detained Taliban leaders are Afghans, therefore their future should be decided in Afghanistan," Mr. Karzai said.

Pakistan's interior minister said earlier that the Pakistani government would consider a formal request from Kabul for the extradition of Mullah Baradar. A few hours later, a statement from the interior ministry said the detained Taliban leader could face charges for illegally entering Pakistan. On Friday, Taliban gunmen and suicide bombers attacked a major hotel and two guesthouses in the Afghan capital, killing at least 17 people and showing the group remains a potent force despite a string of recent setbacks. The dead included Indian Army officers, a French filmmaker and an Italian diplomat who was slain in his room after phoning information about the assailants to officials.

India's foreign ministry said it was trying to determine whether—a day after India held peace talks with Pakistan—its nationals were deliberately targeted, a conclusion reached by Afghan police but denied by a Taliban spokesman.

Afghan official: Pakistani group behind Kabul attacks

The Associated Press
03/02/2010

KABUL — An Afghan intelligence official on Tuesday blamed the Pakistan-based militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba for last week's car bomb and suicide attacks that killed 16 people in the heart of Kabul.

The same militants have been fingered by India for the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks that killed 166 people.

Friday's assaults in the Afghan capital targeted residential hotels popular with foreigners, and six Indians were among the dead. The Afghan Taliban claimed responsibility within hours of the attacks, but the assertion that Pakistan-based militants were involved could jeopardize tentative peace talks between Pakistan and India that were relaunched only last week.

India pulled out of the talks after the Mumbai attacks, which ratcheted up tensions between the nuclear-armed rivals.

Saeed Ansari, a spokesman for Afghanistan's intelligence service, told The Associated Press on Tuesday that his agency has evidence that Pakistanis, specifically Lashkar-e-Taiba, were involved in the attacks. He said one of the attackers was heard speaking Urdu, a Pakistani language.

Lashkar-e-Taiba is one of several militant Islamist groups that Pakistan's military intelligence helped create in the 1980s, seeking to use them against archrival India and fight Indian rule in Kashmir, which both countries claim.

Ansari also said that the Taliban "had no knowledge" of the Kabul attacks up to five hours after they began.

However, an Afghan Taliban spokesman telephoned an Associated Press reporter about 2½ hours after the attacks began Friday to claim responsibility and said foreigners were the target.

The Kabul attack came a day after India and Pakistan held their first official talks since the November 2008 Mumbai attacks. India insisted during the talks Thursday that Pakistan needed to make more aggressive efforts to rein in anti-Indian insurgents there.

Friday's assault was the deadliest in Afghanistan's capital since Oct. 8, when a suicide car bomber killed 17 people outside the Indian Embassy. A suicide car bomber killed

more than 60 people in an attack at the gates of the Indian Embassy in July 2008.

India accused archrival Pakistan's main spy agency of involvement in the embassy assault.

But New Delhi did not immediately blame Pakistan after Friday's assault.

India sent a three-member team by air force jet to work with Afghan authorities investigating the attacks, Indian Ambassador Jayant Prasad said Tuesday.

"We've had a team here since the day after the attacks," Prasad said.

New Kabul attack highlights Indian-Pakistani tension in Afghanistan

Deutsche Welle

03/03/2010

By Ratbil Shamel

The Taliban have hit again - in broad daylight, right in the center of Kabul. At least 17 people have died, among them up to nine Indian citizens according to the Indian foreign minister. The assault was carried out in a hotel frequented by Indian nationals. It raises the question once again whether the war in Afghanistan is slowly turning into more of a proxy battle between India and Pakistan.

Suicide bombings have become part of every-day life in Afghanistan. In mid-January the Taliban killed 12 people in an attack on several government buildings in Kabul. It is clear that suicide bombers are targeting Indian establishments more frequently. In the past year and a half, two terrorist attacks have been carried out on the Indian embassy in the Afghan capital.

The spokesman of the Afghan president, Hamed Helmi says there is no special meaning behind the location of the attacks. "Terrorists attack wherever they can. It has little to do with our relationship to our neighbor. Today they attacked Kabul, not too long ago it was Mumbai, and soon they will find some other place for an attack. They are at war with the whole world."

Tug of war over Afghanistan

What Helmi is reluctant to utter is well known among experts: Islamabad and Delhi are competing for influence in Afghanistan.

Currently India is one of the largest investors in Afghanistan. India fears that the Taliban will return to power. Some people believe that they still receive support from parts of the Pakistani government and military. And Islamabad vehemently criticizes India's growing

influence in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan expert Conrad Schetter sees a link between the latest bombing and the official talks that India and Pakistan held in New Delhi on Thursday, just one day before. "Afghanistan has been part of the India-Pakistan conflict for a long time. We have a situation, in which Pakistan accuses India of promoting the separatist Baloch movement through Afghanistan. On the other hand, Pakistan is trying to secure strategic depth in Afghanistan, especially with regard to the Kashmir conflict. Now that the talks have taken place between India and Pakistan, there are certain forces, especially in Pakistan, who are showing their opposition against the talks and are therefore trying to extend the combat zone to Afghanistan."

Pakistan between a rock and a hard place

Schetter knows that Pakistan, which has fought several wars against India, is extremely afraid of losing Kabul to Delhi. "For the past 50 years Pakistan has been worried about getting crushed between the two countries. On the one hand there is the conflict over Kashmir, because it still is not clear whether Kashmir belongs to India or Pakistan, and on the other hand, there is the Pashtun problem on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, which is also disputed. So Pakistan is worried that both conflicts could escalate and it would be caught between its two enemies."

The question is whether it will ever be possible for the US and NATO to secure peace in Afghanistan under these circumstances. "I believe that Obama made the right move a year ago," says Schetter, "when he recognized that Afghanistan and Pakistan are basically one 'AfPak' conflict. In my opinion it is vital to take these underlying issues of Pashtunistan and Kashmir seriously and try to find solutions that everyone can accept."

But Schetter adds that the international community is still far from thinking along these lines and will need some time to come up with comprehensive strategies to tackle the conflicts in South Asia.

MPs want to decide on key policies

Frozan Rahmani - Mar 3, 2010 - 12:51

KABUL (PAN): Concerned about the worsening security situation in the country, members of the Wolesi Jirga or Lower House of the parliament on Wednesday asked the president Hamid Karzai to seek their approval for the fundamental policies prior to their implementation.

According to the constitution, fundamental policies of the country should be determined with approval from the National Assembly.

The call came as the assembly summoned the defence and the interior ministers and top intelligence officials to brief the lawmakers on the current security issues. The MPs expressed their apprehension about the increasingly deteriorating security situation in the

war-devastated country. They asked President Hamid Karzai to consult the legislative body on key issues.

Speaker of the house Muhamamd Yunus Qanuni said that in the wake of the huge challenges facing the nation, there was a need the Assembly to determine the fundamental policies of the country. He asked the president to send the policies in a written form to the house so that the MPs could have their say.

Defence Minister Muhammad Hanif Atmar told the house that the solution of the security problems needed a national consensus as it was not the solo job of the three security organs.

Atmar linked insecurity to continued war and interference from other countries into policies of the government. However, he did not name anyone.

The defence minister claimed the national forces were able to fight the enemy, but he could not predict when peace and stability would be restored in the entire country.

He stressed the need of national unity to overcome the insecurity challenge.

On the occasion, Qanuni assigned four commissions of the lower house including defence, interior affairs, international relations and judicial and justice, to discuss the issue with the ministries of defense and interior and the intelligence department.

MPs asked the interior minister several questions.

In his address, Atmar supported the ban on live coverage from the scenes of insurgent attacks, saying such broadcasts make the operations more complicated, eradicate documents and evidences and endanger the lives of journalists and police. "The footage helps insurgents to organise and coordinate their attacks," he added.

The minister said the government believed in the freedom of speech and would protect it. Atmar asked media officials to maintain professionalism and not to consider the issue as violence against the freedom of the press.

Afghan intelligence ties Pakistani group Lashkar-i-Taiba to recent Kabul attack

The Washington Post

03/03/2010

By Karin Brulliard

KABUL - An Afghan intelligence official said Tuesday that the Pakistani militant group Lashkar-i-Taiba orchestrated the deadly attack that targeted two guesthouses in the capital last week.

The assessment, if true, could signal a departure for the group, which has long focused on fighting India over the disputed region of Kashmir. India blames the militant organization for the siege that killed 165 people in Mumbai in November 2008.

Afghan intelligence spokesman Sayed Ansari said investigators had concluded that Lashkar was involved in the recent attack based on evidence that it was carried out by a team of suicide bombers who spoke Urdu, a Pakistani language, and who were searching

for Indian victims. The Afghan Taliban had previously asserted responsibility for the assault, which left 16 people dead, within hours of its start.

The claim by Afghan intelligence could not be verified Tuesday, and it contradicts the conclusions of other observers. A U.S. military intelligence official told reporters Monday that he believed the Haqqani network, a Pakistan-based Afghan militant group, was behind the attack. Indian officials have said they suspect that the two groups worked in concert to stage the raid.

Still, the involvement of Lashkar-i-Taiba would have significant implications. It could undermine fragile peace efforts between longtime foes Pakistan and India, whose foreign secretaries met last week. India had previously implicated Pakistan in the 2008 bombing of India's embassy in Kabul, saying Pakistani intelligence had collaborated with militants.

Maj. Gen. Michael T. Flynn, the top U.S. military intelligence official in Afghanistan, said Monday that a growing number of the group's fighters are streaming into that country's south for combat experience.

"They are aligning with the Taliban," said Mohammad Saad, a retired Pakistani brigadier and security analyst.

Saad said that several members of the group are training with associates of the Haqqani network in North Waziristan, a Pakistani tribal region bordering Afghanistan, but that language challenges have forced most of them to work alongside Afghan fighters inside Afghanistan.

That also points to increased mixing of militant groups in the volatile Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, where U.S. troops and intelligence are seeking to blunt Taliban and al-Qaeda control. Analysts say insurgencies that are commonly described as distinct are actually a complex stew of overlapping and shifting alliances.

That was underscored Tuesday as the Pakistani Taliban, an offshoot of the Afghan insurgency, confirmed in a statement that the chief of yet another Pakistani militant group, Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, had been killed by a U.S. drone strike Feb. 24. The commander, Qari Zafar, was wanted by U.S. and Pakistani officials in connection with a 2006 bombing of the U.S. Consulate in Karachi.

Zafar's group originated in Pakistan's heartland, but he was killed in North Waziristan, the base of the Haqqani network. The network, led by Siraj Haqqani, is among the most lethal battling U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan, and it has been implicated in several brazen attacks in Kabul.

Ansari, the intelligence spokesman, said Afghan officials "very close to the evidence" had determined that one of the bombers involved in Friday's Kabul attack yelled, "Where is the Indian director?" as he stormed one of guesthouses. Others had also sought out Indians, Ansari said.

"This kind of information, where the Indians are, is not the ability of the Afghan Taliban to know," Ansari said.

The Taliban, in its assertion of responsibility, said it was targeting foreigners. Six Indian nationals, including two army doctors and an engineer, were among those killed in the attack, as were eight Afghans, an Italian diplomat and a French filmmaker.

Holbrooke theory on Kabul attack upsets New Delhi

Asian Tribune

03/03/2010

By R. Vasudevan

New Delhi - New Delhi has reasons to be upset at the views of Richard Holbrooke, special US Representative for Pakistan and Afghanistan, who has rejected reports that the terror strikes in Kabul specifically targeted Indians.

Holbrooke's statement in Washington on March 3, was seen by Indian officials as a blatant US bid to underplay the Taliban terror attack. On February 26, six Indians were killed in a series of blasts that targeted guest houses in Kabul where Indians were staying.

Suicide bombers targeted the Noor guest house, where the Indian army medical mission was stationed. Two army officers were among those killed. The Park Residence guest house, home to many Indians working in the embassy, was also attacked.

"In regard to this attack, I don't accept the fact that this was an attack on an Indian facility like the (Indian) embassy. They were foreigners, non-Indian foreigners hurt. It was a soft target. Let's not jump to conclusions," he told reporters in a news briefing.

His statement came despite the strong clues pointing that the Kabul attacks suspected to have been launched by Pakistan-based terror outfit Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) were aimed specifically at Indians along with Afghan President Hamid Karzai's statement establishing the same.

"I understand why everyone in Pakistan and everyone in India always focuses on the other. But please, let's not draw a conclusion for which there's no proof," Holbrooke added.

Indian officials are surprised and annoyed with Holbrooke's statement, especially because they don't believe his assessment is based on specific information. India has pointed to a statement made on March 2 by a senior Afghan intelligence official who said he has proof that the Laskar-e-Toiba (LeT) was involved in last week's attacks.

While the Taliban have claimed responsibility for the suicide attacks, India says that an LeT angle makes it clear that Indians were very much the focus of the terror strikes. Meanwhile, National Security Advisor Shiv Shankar Menon is travelling to Afghanistan this week to assess how security can be improved for Indians there. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has termed it as an attack on Indians.

Holbrooke noted that both India and Pakistan have an interest in Afghanistan. "This is my own personal feeling about these three countries – Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. The three countries are vastly different in culture, socioeconomic standing, political development, and – but they share a common strategic space," he said, adding that in order to understand America's policy and America's policy dilemma, one has to understand that both India and Pakistan have legitimate security interests in the region.

Noting that the US has good relations with both India and Pakistan; Holbrooke said: "It is our view that it is in our national interest to improve relations with both countries, not at the expense of the other.

5 Pakistani road workers shot dead in Afghanistan

The Associated Press
03/04/2010

KANDAHAR — An Afghan official says five Pakistani road construction workers have been shot dead in the southern city of Kandahar.

The city's deputy police chief, Mohammad Shah Faroqi, says the workers were traveling to their construction site when two gunmen on motorbikes opened fire on their minivan Thursday morning. Five of the laborers died and one was wounded.

The Pakistanis work for Saita Construction Co., a Japanese joint-venture with a contract to repair the road from Kandahar to Punjwai district.

Taliban insurgents dominate much of southern Afghanistan and often attack aid projects launched by the government and NATO forces.

U.S. military questions Karzai's steps on corruption

Reuters
03/04/2010

WASHINGTON - Afghan President Hamid Karzai must take "significant steps" to fight corruption, the U.S. military's top officer said on Wednesday, suggesting Washington was concerned inaction could undercut the campaign against the Taliban.

Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said it was "too early to tell" what Karzai and other leaders have done to address the issue, underscoring persistent tensions between Washington and the Kabul-based government on the issue.

"There have to be significant steps taken on the part of President Karzai and other leaders in Afghanistan to eliminate corruption," Mullen told an audience at Kansas State University in an address broadcast to journalists at the Pentagon.

"It's not going to go away overnight," he said of the corruption problem. "But where it has not been addressed before, it is being addressed now, and we can't move forward in a positive way unless it continues to be."

"He was duly elected by his people and he now has to perform in this area," Mullen said of Karzai, who has faced his own credibility challenges after voter fraud marred his re-election last year.

The Obama administration has been careful not to snipe publicly at Karzai, wanting to show U.S. backing for the new government, particularly as U.S. and NATO forces began a new campaign to push Taliban fighters out of population centers in the South.

"The military aspect of this cannot succeed without success in other areas," Mullen said.

In addition to the corruption issue, the United States has been critical of several recent moves by Karzai's government, including a decision to block foreign observers from a U.N.-backed election watchdog group and planned curbs on media freedom.

Reluctant Pashtuns hamper Afghan recruitment drive

Reuters

03/04/2010

By David Brunnstrom

BRUSSELS - High drop-out and low recruitment rates have hampered NATO efforts to boost security forces to control insurgents in southern Afghanistan, the U.S. general leading the effort said on Wednesday.

Lieutenant-General William B. Caldwell, who is directing an effort to increase the size of the Afghan army and police to 300,000 by 2011, said drop-out rates for the police stood at 25 percent and at 18 percent for the army.

The rate for the best police unit, the paramilitary Afghan National Civil Order Police, was 60-70 percent, Caldwell told reporters.

"This is absolutely unacceptable," he said.

Training Afghan soldiers and police to take over security is critical to the U.S. and NATO strategy in Afghanistan. The sooner Afghans are capable of securing the country, the sooner foreign troops can withdraw, commanders say.

But the strategy hinges on finding enough recruits and training them rapidly.

While new pay scales had helped push recruitment rates since December to more than 7,000 a month, the number of recruits from among ethnic Pashtuns in southern provinces, where the Taliban insurgency is fiercest, remains only 2-3 percent of the total.

"We are not satisfied with the number of Pashtuns coming into the army from the south," Caldwell said.

"We are trying to change the dynamics of this country, to make the southern Pashtun feel part of this nation... we are going to have to do a better job of recruiting down there," he said.

The Pashtuns, who make up about 40 percent of Afghanistan's population, are the predominant ethnic group in southern provinces bordering Pakistan. It is from there that the Taliban draws the vast majority of its support.

ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN

Caldwell said NATO planned to launch an advertising campaign to attract Pashtun recruits, and hoped the effort would be helped by a big military operation designed to reassert government control in Helmand province, in the south.

Caldwell said the overall recruitment drive had been helped by increases in basic pay to \$165 a month, topped up with another \$45 a month in regions worst affected by the insurgency.

"We are generally aware what a Taliban foot-soldier makes," he said. "We are comparable to probably what we hear most foot soldiers make doing something for the Taliban."

Caldwell said his mission, which relies on training personnel provided by NATO allies was still 1,900 short of its target strength of 5,200 trainers.

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said he was working to persuade allies to contribute more to the training mission, which is vital for NATO's long-term exit

strategy.

"I feel confident we will be able to build up our training mission to the required level," he told a news briefing.

However, Rasmussen said NATO had yet to work out how it would replace the 2,000 Dutch soldiers due to end their mission in the southern province of Uruzgan this year.

"Provided the Dutch troops are withdrawn, we have to find replacements," he said. "The Dutch decision has also forced other allies and partners to consider how we can replace the Dutch soldiers."

Charikar Angered by Security Force Presence

IWPR

03/04/2010

By Mohammad Saber Saffor in Charikar

US and Afghan troops agree to leave town at the request of Kabul officials.

A military coordination centre staffed by United States and Afghan forces is moving away from a provincial capital where local people have complained about the army presence.

The Operational Coordination Center, Provincial, OCCP, is based in the police station at Charikar, the capital of Parwan province, which has been one of the safer places in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taleban in 2001.

The Taleban encountered stiff resistance in the province when they ran the country and, though still active in much of Afghanistan, they have never been able to gain much headway in Parwan.

A member of the US forces who declined to give his name told IWPR the troops were in Parwan to cooperate with the Afghan security forces and that local people should be happy about their presence.

"The people should not be worried about possible insecurity in the province, because we are ensuring security for them," he said.

He said coalition forces patrol various districts of the province including Charikar town - which is close to the American military's giant Bagram air base - but no one has been bothered by them so far.

As part of the deployment, a company of US army personnel together with Afghan troops set up the coordination centre several months ago, angering the local population.

Sayed Mahmud, a Charikar shopkeeper, shakes his head in despair as a convoy of foreign military vehicles passes by.

"I do not know whether these forces make us more or less secure. I am sure that life for the people in Charikar is more dangerous because suicide attacks and roadside bombs come together with these forces and it is the civilians who will suffer," he said.

Mir Abdolshokur, speaker of the provincial council in Parwan, believes that the presence of the foreign forces puts restrictions on local people.

"The people are deprived of their freedoms by the deployment of these forces. People are not comfortable about visiting their friends at night, because the foreign forces may be nervous about them moving around at this time," he said.

Provincial politicians have been passing local concerns about the coordination centre to central government and people in Charikar believe this has led to the decision to move it. No date has been given for its relocation.

Major General Mawlana Abdorrahman Sayed Kheli, security commander in Parwan province, said, "An understanding has been reached on the basis of which the coordination centre and the foreign forces will be positioned far from the city."

He said he hoped this would deal with people's concerns but did not give any details.

A US military spokesman confirmed the move, "The OCCP ... is moving, but not because of local opposition but rather because the Afghan leadership wanted it in a new location." He said land for the new centre was being secured but did not give further details.

The foreign forces, who include some from the United Arab Emirates as well as Americans, have been using the police headquarters for about four months.

Abdolzaher Salangi, a member of parliament for Parwan, said security in the area was already adequate without the need for foreign forces. "Parwan police have the capability and capacity to fight our enemies, because the security forces in Parwan are supported by the people. There is no need for the foreign forces to be present in this town."

He said all the people oppose the Taleban and have always cooperated with the security forces.

Some residents had warned that if the international troops continued to deploy in their town, they would lose faith in the government and may stop cooperating with it.

One resident, Shahpur, said, "The presence of the foreign forces means that the government does not trust us. We defended the government ... We did not cooperate with the Taleban. Security was ensured."

Indian top official in Kabul to review security of citizens

Mohammad Ali Mohmand - Mar 5, 2010 - 14:49

KABUL (PAN): President Hamid Karzai met with Indian Prime Minister's National Security Adviser Shiv Shankar Menon on Friday and discussed with him matters of mutual interests, particularly the expansion of bilateral relations between the two countries.

A statement issued from the presidential press office said Menon familiarised Karzai with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's message during the meeting. They discussed bilateral relations and the continuation of the recovery process of cooperation between Afghanistan and India.

The visiting Indian official also gave an official invitation to Karzai to visit India at any time convenient to him.

National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon arrived in Kabul on Friday to discuss the issue of ensuring security for about 4,000 Indians in Afghanistan with the Afghan leadership.

During his two-day visit, Menon will also meet some other leaders of Afghanistan.

Soon after his arrival, Menon held discussions with Indian Ambassador Jayant Prasad with regard to safety of Indian nationals working on various developmental and reconstruction projects across Afghanistan in the backdrop of last Friday's attack in Kabul.

The proposals carried by Memon include setting up of protected venues where the Indians working on projects could be housed.

There are also suggestions for deploying security personnel at places where Indians work.

As part of India's USD 1.3 billion assistance, about 4,000 Indians are working on various projects in areas like healthcare, power, education and social sector.

Memon's visit came after the last week's attacks on two guesthouses in the heart of Kabul city. Seventeen people, including nine Indian and three westerners were killed in the attacks involving suicide bombers and a car bomb attack.

A Pakistan based militant group Lashkar-e-Tayyaba was blamed for the cordianted assault, but the group denied its involvement.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh Friday said the Feb 26 terror attack in Kabul that killed nine Indians will not bend the will of Indian people to help Afghanistan and vowed to assist that country in shaping its destiny without "outside interference."

The entire nation was outraged by the most recent brutal attack in Kabul on February 26 which has led to the loss of 7 innocent Indian lives, Manmohan Singh told parliament.

"These Indian nationals were in Afghanistan on a mission of goodwill and friendship helping to construct the peaceful and democratic Afghanistan that our Afghan friends desire," he said. "We condemn this cowardly act," he added.

"I wish to assure this House that such attacks will not bend the will of the people of India," the prime minister said, adding that Indian assistance in the reconstruction has received widespread support among the people of Afghanistan.

Manmohan Singh said Afghan President Hamid Karzai had telephoned him last week and assured him that all steps will be taken to ensure the security of Indians there.

"I assured him (Karzai) of any support and assistance that may be required," the prime minister said.

"We are closely monitoring the developments with regard to Afghanistan and we will assist the people of Afghanistan in securing their legitimate right to determine their destiny in the manner they chose without outside interference," the prime minister said.

New Afghan chief in Marjah has criminal record

The Associated Press
03/06/2010

KABUL – The man chosen to be the fresh face of good Afghan governance in a town just seized from the Taliban has a violent criminal record in Germany, but Western officials said Saturday they are not pushing to oust him.

Court records and news reports in Germany show that Abdul Zahir, the man appointed as the new civilian chief in Marjah, served part of a more than four-year prison sentence for stabbing his son in 1998. A U.S. official confirmed that he did serve time in Germany, though Zahir denies he committed any crime.

"I was not a killer. I was not a smuggler. ... I didn't commit any crime," Zahir told The Associated Press in a telephone interview Friday evening. He said allegations of a criminal record were "all a lie."

Zahir's integrity is an issue because his job is to convince residents of the town in Helmand province that the Afghan government can provide them with a better life than the Taliban, which were routed during a three-week offensive by thousands of U.S., NATO and Afghan troops. Marjah is the first major test of NATO's counterinsurgency strategy since President Barack Obama ordered 30,000 new American troops to try to reverse the Taliban's momentum.

Adm. Gregory Smith, director of communications for NATO, said the international

alliance strongly supports Helmand Gov. Gulab Mangal, who picked Zahir for the job. "Zahir, from our reporting, is doing good work down there," Smith said Saturday, adding that NATO is not pushing Afghan officials to oust him.

Zahir said he lived in Germany for 15 years before returning to Afghanistan in 2000. During his time in Germany, he said he worked in a hotel and at a laundry service.

Zahir, a leading member of the Alizai tribe, has lived with his family for the past four years in Helmand's capital, Lashkar Gah, residents of the city said. He worked there with Jilani Popal, head of the Afghan Independent Directorate of Local Government, an agency seeking to boost the effectiveness and capacity of local governments.

He said he took the job as civilian chief in Marjah because "I love my country and my country needed me. My relatives, my tribe were here."

Zahir said his adversaries in Afghanistan were trying to tarnish his reputation.

"This news is coming from those people who are against me," he said. "They are against my relations with the foreigners. They want to sabotage me. They don't want such a person to serve the people, who has good relations with Americans, British, and foreigners."

In an interview last week, Mangal, the governor of Helmand, said he wasn't aware of anything illegal in Zahir's background.

"He is not being appointed forever, but he will be here for some time," he said.

Mangal said that a request was made of Interpol to check whether the new Marjah district governor had any outstanding warrants or was being sought. He said Interpol said he was not on any watch list or wanted for any crime.

Zahir has been tasked with bringing good governance to Marjah and ensuring that the new police in the area are symbolic of a new breed of Afghan policeman that is honest and committed to bringing security to the country.

"In Marjah we have a new strategy," Mangal said. "If we don't bring security and development and if we don't solve their problems, then they will think the Taliban is better than us."

If Zahir isn't up to the task, Mangal said, "We will dismiss him. If he doesn't have the ability, if he doesn't bring law and order and security, then we will dismiss him."

In Kabul, President Hamid Karzai's spokesman Waheed Omar said he wasn't familiar with Zahir but that Marjah's residents will support the government if it brings security and an administration free of corruption.

Omar warned that poor governance could drive residents back to the Taliban.

Court and news accounts from the late 1990s provide details of Zahir's past.

Annette von Schmiedeberg, a spokeswoman for the Offenbach branch of the prosecutor's office in Darmstadt in central Germany, said Friday that an Afghan citizen with the name Abdul Z. was sentenced to four years and nine months in prison for attempted manslaughter by the county court in Darmstadt on Nov. 2, 1998. Von Schmiedeberg said that in accordance with German privacy laws she could not give the full name or details about the crime.

A person familiar with Zahir and the 1998 court sentencing in Germany identified him Friday for the AP after viewing a pair of photographs of him taken last month. He asked that his name not be published because he feared for his life.

An American official in Kabul, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the topic, also confirmed that Zahir has a criminal record in Germany.

The newspaper Darmstaedter Echo provided three archived articles to the AP that confirmed a court hearing and sentencing of an Afghan citizen at the county court in Darmstadt on the same date, Nov. 2, 1998.

In an article from Nov. 3, 1998, it said the defendant from Afghanistan was sentenced to four years and nine months in prison because "he attempted to stab his 18-year-old son to death with a kitchen knife in the kitchen of his stepdaughter in Nieder-Roden on Dec. 15, 1997, around 4:45 p.m." Nieder-Roden is part of the small town of Rodgau in the central German state of Hesse.

The newspaper said the defendant, who was 47 years old at the time of the sentencing, confessed to the allegations.

He was described as a father of 13 children and husband of two wives.

"The court's chamber assesses that the attack, in which the young man received life-threatening injuries to his liver, was a deliberate attempt of manslaughter and it is therefore sentencing the accused to four years and nine months," the Darmstaedter Echo said.

According to the newspaper's account, the accused said he had been persecuted by the Taliban in Afghanistan and moved with his family to Rodgau in 1989. The court said the man could not cope with the fact that three of his stepchildren, among them two twin sons, turned away from him and moved into their own apartment in the fall of 1996, it reported.

In August 1997, he lured them back to Afghanistan saying he wanted them to attend a wedding there, the newspaper said. But once they arrived in Afghanistan, he took away

their passports and plane tickets and abandoned them, it said.

In early December, the sons returned to Germany with financial help from somebody else, the newspaper said.

Back in Rodgau, the convicted man told other Afghans that his children had been kidnapped by an "archenemy in Afghanistan," the newspaper said. However, when one of his wives told him on Dec. 15 that his sons had returned to Germany, he beat her, it said.

One of his sons consequently confronted him about the beating, and he reacted by stabbing his son with an eight-inch (21-centimeter) kitchen knife, it said.

After the incident, the accused fled via the Netherlands and the Czech Republic to the German-Polish border where he was arrested on Jan. 7, 1998, near the German town of Goerlitz, it said.

In an earlier article about the ongoing court trial in Darmstadt, the Darmstaedter Echo reported on Oct. 15, 1998, that the accused was a driver for the defense minister in his homeland and also worked as a salesman.

Karzai calls on Taliban to stop attacking schools

Reuters
03/06/2010

Afghan President Hamid Karzai pleaded with insurgents on Saturday to stop attacking schools so that the five million Afghan children with no access to education can reach their potential.

Taliban insurgents who are locked in a battle against the Afghan government and its foreign backers frequently attack schools in remote areas of Afghanistan because, they say, pupils are taught un-Islamic subjects.

At a ceremony in Kabul, Karzai rang a gong to mark the start of Afghanistan's school year.

"Five million school-aged children of our country, can't go to school," Karzai said. "Some of them due to Taliban attacks and their schools' being shut down, and others due to lack of facilities." "If they (Taliban) shut down schools ... I can say that they are committing an atrocity against Afghanistan and Islam," Karzai said.

Afghanistan's education minister, Farooq Wardak, said around 11 million Afghans are illiterate, more than one third of the country's population.

Violence in Afghanistan is at record levels since Taliban insurgents, driven from power in 2001, made a comeback in 2006. Insurgent attacks on the government and foreign forces across the country as well have increased markedly in the past year.

While in power, the Taliban banned education for girls and restricted it to a religious curriculum for boys.

Wardak said only about 1 million Afghans were in school under the Taliban, and now there are 7 million.

Afghan Drug Trade Complicates U.S. Task in Marjah

TIME

03/06/2010

By Tim McGirk in Kabul

The impetus for the U.S.-led assault on Marjah began one moonless night last May when a squad of American and Afghan anti-narcotics agents, backed by U.S. Marines, slipped through the town's empty streets and raided the Lachoya opium bazaar.

Crashing open shutters, they found shop after shop stacked to the ceiling with bundles of opium, heroin, hashish, guns and improvised explosive devices used in roadside bombings. "If anybody needed proof that there was a nexus between the Taliban and drug traffickers, this was it," says a Western counter-narcotics agent in Kabul.

Marjah was at the center of a dozen international drug networks reaching as far as Europe, Russia and the Far East. When the haul was later tallied - 18 tons of opium, 1 ton of hashish, and 46 kilos of pure, crystal heroin - it was probably the largest drug seizure on record, anywhere.

Not surprisingly, the raid displeased the town's drug lords and their Taliban protectors. They rushed to Lachoy bazaar and kept the U.S. and Afghan drug force pinned down under fire for four days, say counter-narcotics agents in Kabul.

Unlike that raid, NATO's 15,000-troop assault on the town last month was no secret. Alliance commanders had broadcast news of the planned attack to give civilians time to get out of the way. The drawback of the U.S. and its allies telegraphing their intentions was predictable: Three months ago, locals told TIME, every drug trafficker dismantled his labs, grabbed what remained of his stash, and slipped away. "We knew this was going to happen," griped one drug expert. "To catch these guys, you need the element of surprise."

Having captured the town, NATO and Afghan officials face a quandary that, if

mishandled, could jeopardize the operation's goal of turning Marjah's people against the Taliban. Local farmers are just a month away from harvesting the area's primary crop, opium poppy. Playing by the rules, the crop should be destroyed, but such an action could swiftly turn the local population against the Western alliance, and the "government in a box" they brought to Marjah. Says one farmer, Mohammad Rahim Khan, "I spent lots of money on my field and so did my neighbors. If the government officials destroy the fields, nearly all the people will rise against them." That's why, according to highly placed Afghan officials, U.S. commander Gen. Stanley McChrystal opposes wiping out this particular poppy harvest.

McChrystal is expected to win the argument. Concedes one western drug expert in Kabul, "We just can't go in and burn down their fields."

But some Western counter-narcotics officials in Afghanistan would like to do precisely that, offering the Marjah farmers payment for the loss of their opium poppy crop. But as one drug expert complains, "You'd be rewarding criminality." He adds: "These people knew about the offensive and they planted the crop anyway. They wanted to make a profit."

These counter-narcotics officials point out that other swathes of eastern Afghanistan have been cleared of opium poppy without igniting revolt. They also argue that if the poppy is allowed to ripen, wily drug traffickers will find ways of harvesting it even if Marjah is ringed by 5,000 Marines. Says Gretchen Peters, author and expert on Taliban drug ties with traffickers: "'Counter-narcotics, just like counterinsurgency, is like playing the arcane game of whack-a-mole. You knock it out in one place and it pops up somewhere else."

Marjah's poppy planters, for their part, insist they had no choice but to plant. The Taliban, some say, told them to grow the crop to fund the insurgency. But farmer Khan disagrees. "Nobody forced us," he insists. It's simple economics: Opium pays far better than the wheat and grapes that Marjah's farmers used to grow. The same goes for the Taliban, of course. According to U.N. experts, the insurgents last year reaped nearly \$300 million from the drug trade, though Afghan officials put the figure far lower, at between \$80-100 million.

"Even if it's 'only' \$80 million, that's still enough to fuel the insurgency for a year," says one counter-narcotics agent. And nearly all of the Taliban's drug profits came from Helmand province, and from Marjah in particular, an area experts say is probably the world's biggest illegal producer of opium poppies.

The local drug lords make themselves inconspicuous in the town. Marjah has no gaudy narco-mansions - Afghan drug lords build their palaces, and bank their money, in Dubai - and there are none of the vicious turf wars that characterize the Mexican and Colombian drug cartels. "There's enough to go around for everybody," says one Western drug agent who visited Marjah.

In Marjah, Taliban commanders had a hand in every facet of drug operations, according to agents. They collected a tithe from farmers (as do corrupt government officials in other areas); at harvest time, Taliban fighters put down their AK-47s and help in the poppy fields; they guard heroin labs and ride shotgun on smugglers' convoys across trackless deserts into Pakistan and Iran. Says Gen. Daoud Daoud, the Interior Ministry's chief of Counter-Narcotics, "The Taliban are involved in international networks, along with Iranians, Pakistanis, Tajiks and Germans."

Having decided to flee ahead of NATO's arrival in town, some of the traffickers - locals and drug experts believe - fled south to Pakistan's empty Baluchistan desert, while others are holed up in the nearby mountains of Musa Qala and the rest de-camped to Nimruz province, along a major smuggling route.

Fresh challenges await McChrystal's plans to bring good governance to Marjah. The drug traffickers can still flash around large wads of cash, and it may be difficult for some Afghan officials, newly arrived in town with their slender wage packets, to resist a bribe. Farmer Khan has noticed that in the past, "when there is no Taliban, the government men are taking money from the smugglers to help them move drugs across the border."

Some locals fear an upsurge in confrontation in the weeks ahead. Says Shaistah Gul, "When the trees and fields get greener and bigger, the Taliban will show themselves again, and the Americans will start their raids. It will be hard for us."

NATO asks for more Czechs in Afghanistan

6 March 2010 -
Payame-Aftab

PRAGUE, Czech Republic, March 5 -- NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has asked the Czech Republic's government in Prague for more troops in Afghanistan.

Rasmussen is attempting to bolster allies' involvement in training the Afghan military and police forces to eventually assume control of the country in its battle against Taliban and al-Qaida Islamic extremists and end the NATO mission, the CTK news agency said.

"It is essential for our transition strategy in Afghanistan that we get our training mission up and running," Rasmussen said at a news conference after meeting Friday with Prime Minister Jan Fischer, the agency reported.

Involvement in the mission is opposed by Czech leftist parties, although parliament approved sending 535 troops this year and a proposal for another 55 and two radar detachments is still pending, the report said.

Brown Pledges New Vehicles, More Trainers on Afghanistan Visit

Payame-Afatab

March 6 -- Prime Minister Gordon Brown promised more police trainers and new armored vehicles during a visit to U.K. troops in Afghanistan, a day after facing questions on his control of funding for the Iraq war.

Britain will send 150 additional police trainers to the war zone by April, an official travelling with Brown said. The government is also set to spend 100 million pounds (\$151 million) to replace the Snatch Land Rovers used by U.K. forces, the official said.

Brown's trip to Afghanistan follows his evidence to an official inquiry into the Iraq war being chaired by John Chilcot, a retired civil servant. After telling Chilcot yesterday that he never limited resources for British forces in Iraq, he rebuffed suggestions today that his troop visit is timed to deflect attention from that testimony in final weeks before the U.K. general election.

"I've been planning this visit for a long time," Brown told reporters on arriving at the Camp Bastion, the British base in southern Afghanistan. "For the last four years I've come here at around this time, to see troops, to see what progress has been made. It's really important to come at this stage."

Britain's opposition Conservative Party said in a briefing note to reporters that today's trip amounts to Brown "using the armed forces as props" and charged him with doing so on past occasions, such as his visit to U.K. forces in Iraq during the week of the Conservatives' annual conference in autumn 2007.

General Election

Brown's first trip to Afghanistan was in March 2007, when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, and then in December of that year after he became prime minister. In 2008, he returned three times, and also traveled to the country in April, August and December last year.

This weekend's visit is likely to be Brown's last before a general election, which must be held by June at the latest.

The Snatch Land Rovers will be replaced with a batch of 200 new light armored vehicles by the middle of next year. They'll be manufactured in the U.K. and funded directly by the Treasury, meaning financing won't come out of the existing defense budget.

Snatch Land Rovers have been a subject of criticism from opposition politicians and

linked to the deaths of 36 soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. In response, the government has already ramped up purchases of heavier U.S.-built Mastiff and Ridgeback trucks. The U.K. currently has 170 of those in Afghanistan, though they are in such demand that no spares are on hand at Camp Bastion, Major James Dove-Dixon told reporters today.

“Not fully funding the army,” as the government had been asked to do, “undoubtedly cost the lives of soldiers,” Charles Guthrie, who was chief of the defense staff from 1997 to 2001, said in yesterday’s Times newspaper. “He should be asked why he was so unsympathetic towards defense and so sympathetic to other departments.”

Military Decisions

Brown yesterday denied he ever sought to influence military decisions on cost grounds. He said he told his officials that all urgent operational requirements should be met and he set up a special mechanism in the Treasury to speed up the transfer of money to the Ministry of Defense.

Brown surveyed the results of Operation Moshtarak, the first major initiative under U.S. General Stanley McChrystal’s new strategy to combat Taliban insurgents. The deployment has involved British and other coalition soldiers in partnership with Afghan forces and police taking most of the Sangin Valley, which contains about 75 percent of the population of Helmand province.

Moshtarak has “been one of the great success stories of the campaign in Afghanistan and I want to express my gratitude to all of you who have been involved,” Brown told troops in Lashkar Gah. “We remember all those who have given their lives in the last few months,” he said. “We will do everything we can to support you with the equipment necessary and the resources you need.”

Economic Headlines

Pomegreat signs £3m a year deal to buy pomegranate juice from Afghanistan

Telegraph, UK

03/02/2010

By Ben Farmer in Kabul

Pomegreat has signed a provisional agreement to buy 500 tonnes of concentrate each year from the country's first fruit juice factory, based on the outskirts of Kabul. It will also buy a further 500 tonnes of fresh pomegranates, making the deal worth £3m a year.

Afghanistan considers itself the home of pomegranates and the fruit is one of the few crops to rival the income from opium poppies.

Demand in the UK has soared on their reputation as a medicinal super fruit, but until now the pomegranates considered the best in the world have been unavailable.

Under the terms of the deal, Pomegreat will buy around four-fifths of its pomegranate juice concentrate from the factory. The first shipment will arrive within six weeks.

Adam Pritchard, chief executive, said: "I have been waiting for a factory in Afghanistan to become available for four or five years. The product is fantastic."

America is injecting hundreds of millions of pounds into Afghan agriculture in the hope it can cut the rural unemployment accused of fostering the Taliban-led insurgency and stem the poppy production that accounts for more than 90pc of the world's heroin.

Afghanistan's most celebrated pomegranates come from the southern provinces of Kandahar and Helmand, which have seen the most fighting and are also poppy-growing strongholds.

Afghanistan has more than 40 varieties of the fruit. Kandahar pomegranates can grow to 2lbs in weight.

However, orchards and irrigation streams have been shattered by decades of fighting and violence has made it difficult for farmers to bring fruit to market.

The UK pomegranate juice market has grown to an estimated £21m a year. Pomegreat has 60pc market share and sells about 8m litre cartons a year.

Building Afghanistan's Financial System

VOA

03/03/2010

U.S. Treasury officials are working with their Afghan partners to lay the groundwork for more effective, corruption-free management of public funds.

The U.S. strategy for Afghanistan hinges on a two-pronged approach: improving security through building the capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces, and building governance capacity within the Afghan government so it can better provide much needed goods and services to the Afghan people. While battles, such as the ongoing one in Marjah, will still be fought, the focus is more and more turning to the transition of security responsibility to the Afghan security forces. At the same time, an increasing number of civilian experts and professionals are working with Afghan partners to build up Afghanistan's capacity to become self-sufficient through good governance, and economic development initiatives.

The U.S. Department of the Treasury is one of the agencies involved in this effort. Speaking at the American University in Kabul on February 10, Deputy Secretary of the Treasury Neal Wolin spoke of Treasury's crucial role in preparing Afghanistan for the future.

The Treasury Department has a dual mission in Afghanistan. First, to strengthen Afghanistan's systems of financial management so that Afghan authorities can collect, manage and spend Afghan resources on Afghan priorities transparently and effectively. And second, to combat illicit financial activity and deny funds to terrorists.

Because donor governments worry about corruption, most international financial aid is administered by outside agencies, bypassing the Afghan authorities, said Deputy Secretary Wolin. Thus, "Afghans miss out on the opportunity to shape the projects such funds support. The government of Afghanistan misses the opportunity to develop the capacity to administer such large-scale expenditures effectively."

U.S. Treasury officials are working with their Afghan partners to lay the groundwork for more effective, corruption-free management of public funds, said Deputy Secretary Wolin.

Second, the Treasury seeks to minimize illicit financial activity and prevent funds from reaching terrorists; and to build Afghanistan's capacity to gain control over the flow of funds within the country. So they are building a strong central bank, which can help facilitate and promote economic growth and help disrupt the financial networks on which terrorists depend. Establishing mobile banking and payment card services for the Afghan people, thus eliminating a large percentage of cash transactions, is another step in that direction.

The work of promoting Afghanistan's fiscal independence will not be finished anytime soon, but it is necessary if Afghanistan is to become a strong, independent nation. "Just as the U.S. military looks forward to the day when we can begin to effect a responsible transition to Afghan forces," said Deputy Secretary Wolin, "we at Treasury look forward to the day when our technical expertise is no longer needed."

As Afghanistan Contracting Surges, Who's Following the Money?

Huffington Post

03/03/2010

By Christine Spolar, Ben Protess

In the past eight years, the United States has allocated \$51 billion to rebuild and stabilize Afghanistan. But tracking that money sometimes seems as challenging as finding the leaders of the Taliban.

No one keeps an exact count of the number of private contractors working in Afghanistan -- even though Congress ordered that be done more than two years ago. There's no central list of all the contracts now in force. Government auditors cannot determine with confidence if the reconstruction money is being properly spent or meets the stated objectives. And efforts to improve coordination among the key U.S. agencies managing the money -- the Pentagon, the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development -- have lagged at best.

That is the picture that emerges from dozens of interviews with auditors, contractors, congressional aides and inspectors general, who echo the findings of independent government reports over the past decade. Without rigorous record-keeping, they say, the contracting process is vulnerable to waste, duplication of effort and fraud.

The oversight task is growing more critical, because as the Obama administration boosts the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan it also is spawning a surge in contractors hired to build schools and government offices, to help farmers grow cash crops other than poppies that fuel heroin production -- and, in the most critical nation-building task, to train Afghan police and soldiers.

An estimated 56,000 more contractors—almost double the 30,000 additional troops to be deployed this year—are expected to be working in Afghanistan by the end of 2010, according to the Congressional Research Service. The number of contractors could top 160,000, exceeding the ranks of U.S. troops fighting the Taliban.

But that's just an estimate. A key official in the inspector general's office established to oversee Afghan reconstruction spending said that simply "defining the universe" of contractor spending has been difficult.

“It is a frustration,” said John Brummet, chief auditor in the Office of the Special Inspector General for Reconstruction in Afghanistan. “Everyone assumes the information is there but it just is not. You’d think the [U.S. command in Kabul] could say they have 200 contractors there but...it’s just not there.”

Spending on Afghan reconstruction represents about 20 percent of the total cost of the war, which reached \$230 billion by the end of 2009. About half of the reconstruction spending goes toward training Afghan security forces.

Attempts to oversee the billions of dollars flowing to the contractors have been complicated by congressional inattention, severe gaps in manpower and ineffective training for the military officers and bureaucrats shipped off to Afghanistan to monitor reconstruction work, according to agency audits and interviews with auditors.

Even identifying the authority most responsible for managing the rebuilding of Afghanistan is a challenge. Asked for the name of that person, the Defense Department’s public affairs office for procurement named a lieutenant colonel in Virginia, an Army official in San Antonio, a deputy secretary in the Army in Virginia and a general in Afghanistan. No single official would be able to explain all the aspects of a given contract, the office said. A State Department spokesperson also could not provide a central point of contact for reconstruction spending.

One government official long familiar with the contracting process in Iraq and Afghanistan, speaking on condition of anonymity, said all agencies suffer from fractured lines of accountability. “There’s not one person to pin the rose on,” the official said. “And that is exactly what’s wrong with the process.”

The electronic record-keeping systems of the three biggest spenders on reconstruction—Defense, State and USAID—are incompatible, according to the inspectors general for Afghanistan and Iraq. So coordinating spending by the agencies remains beyond the capacity of the inspector general’s office and the government’s chief accountant, the Government Accountability Office.

“It sounds like it should be easy but for so many different reasons, it is challenging,” said John Hutton, the GAO’s director of acquisition and sourcing management.

On Monday, the Wartime Commission on Contracting, a bipartisan panel formed to oversee reconstruction in Iraq and Afghanistan, asked representatives from State and Defense why the agencies have yet to coordinate their work.

The commission’s chairman, Michael Thibault, sharply questioned Ambassador John Herbst, the State Department’s Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization, about a three-month-old overture from Defense Secretary Robert Gates to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, calling for changes in how the government handles spending on security for reconstruction projects. Gates’ Dec. 15 memo calls for “a new model of shared

responsibility.” It was copied to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the national security adviser and the director of Office of Management and Budget.

As of March, members of the contracting commission said, there was no response from the State Department. “What’s going on?” Thibault asked Herbst at Monday’s hearing.

Herbst responded: “Certainly coordination is a very important issue, but I’m afraid I can just tell you this is being looked at.” Thibault didn’t hide his frustration: “That’s unacceptable.”

On Capitol Hill, the oversight of contract spending in Afghanistan—like the war itself—was long treated as secondary to the challenges in Iraq. Only in 2008 did Congress establish a special inspector general’s office to audit Afghan nation-building.

That inspector general’s office for reconstruction has been working with far fewer staff members than the equivalent office for contract spending in Iraq, run by Stuart W. Bowen. At work since the first year of the Iraq war, Bowen has produced 164 inspections, 160 audits and one book. In his last report, Bowen found that coordination still was lacking in the war zone and recommended a single federal office to oversee reconstruction contracting.

Bowen said in a recent interview that Iraq illuminates the lessons of wartime contracting. Many problems stemmed from the decision to launch a war without long-term plans for battle or rebuilding, he said. In Iraq, millions of dollars spent initially to rebuild electrical grids and power plants and schools were wasted or lost as conflict raged, his reports found.

On his first trip to Baghdad, Bowen said, he saw U.S. officials delivering duffle bags of cash to government ministries, presumably to keep basic services running. “There were simply inadequate controls,” he said.

A key problem in both Iraq and Afghanistan has been a dearth of people in government and the military who know how to read contracts and assess the contractor’s performance. These people, known as contracting officer representatives, or CORs, are in desperately short supply – and their absence is noted in every audit of agency oversight of contracting in the past few years.

Ironically, the weak link in the current wars can be traced back to the peace dividend at the end of the Cold War. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Defense and State departments cut back on personnel in the 1990s. Contract officer representatives were among the first to go. No one anticipated two far-flung wars would follow. Today, the government is scrambling to train 20,000 contract officers over the next five years.

Meanwhile, efforts to provide better information about contracting sometimes run into trouble on the ground.

In July 2008, State, Defense and USAID agreed to cooperate and compile a common list of contract personnel working in the war zone. But the GAO reported in October that the system still wasn't working. Among other problems, the agencies could not verify the names of guards hired to protect contractors or U.S. personnel.

One obstacle, the GAO found, was that many Afghans balked at having their names and other data entered into a U.S. computer system. USAID officials said local workers feared for their safety if the system—known as SPOT or the Synchronized Predeployment and Operational Tracker – were ever compromised. In response, Defense officials offered to put USAID information into classified computers. But USAID officials resisted because they had little access to classified computers, GAO found.

USAID was only part of the problem. None of the agencies, when questioned, would vouch for the information already entered into the system, the GAO found.

“The agencies could not verify whether the reported data were accurate or complete,” the audit said.

ASA partnering in Afghanistan reconstruction

Farm Press
03/04/2010

"Diets will improve and soy consumption will increase as Afghan agriculture and the local economy develops. When this happens, everybody wins."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has announced that the American Soybean Association's (ASA) World Initiative for Soy in Human Health (WISHH) program and three partnering organizations will receive a cooperative agreement for work in Afghanistan.

The USDA Food for Progress program brings the strengths of soy protein to fight some of the highest rates of malnutrition in the world, as well as help rebuild Afghanistan's food industry. The estimated value of the project is \$26 million.

"We are excited to help Afghan farmers rebuild their infrastructure while we make healthy food available to their fellow citizens and to build a market for soy," said WISHH Chairman and ASA Board member Scott Fritz, a soybean producer from Winamac, Ind. "Diets will improve and soy consumption will increase as Afghan agriculture and the local economy develops. When this happens, everybody wins."

The three-year project will allow WISHH to launch its first extended effort in

Afghanistan. Joining WISHH on the project are: Shelter for Life International, which is headquartered in Minnesota; California-based Nutrition and Education International Inc. (NEI), and CBI Global located in Ohio. These organizations have seen the need and enormous potential for soy in their approximately 20 combined years of work in the war-torn country.

USDA's efforts to help redevelop Afghanistan's agriculture sector is the top Obama Administration priority for reconstruction. The USDA cooperative agreement will provide 240 metric tons of defatted soy flour over the next three years to meet immediate nutritional needs of 5,000 women and their families. The agreement also includes 13,750 metric tons of soybean oil that will be monetized or sold into the local market in support of the project activities. The project will also bolster the processing end of the agricultural value chain, with the shipment of 6,000 metric tons of soybeans over three years. Afghan soybean processing facilities will use the soybeans to produce soy flour and soybean oil for the local market. Over the life of the program and all of its activities, this project will support more than 220,000 direct beneficiaries.

Afghanistan has some of the worst health statistics in the world. According to UNICEF, more than half of all children under five suffer from moderate or severe stunting. Twenty five percent of children die before reaching their fifth birthday. The health of rural Afghan people, particularly women and children, is often the worst in the nation.

NEI founder and nutrition scientist Dr. Steven Kwon survived the post-war devastation in Korea in the 1950s before moving to the United States. Those experiences prompted him to go to Afghanistan in 2003 to see if he could help. Dr. Kwon identified that soy could play an important role in meeting the dire need for protein.

With the support of local Afghan leaders, NEI has distributed soy flour to pregnant and lactating women and conducted nutrition education and soy cooking seminars. NEI has also worked with small bakeries to encourage them to use 10 percent soy flour in the production of naan (a traditional flatbread) for elementary schools and refugee camps.

Adding 10 percent soy flour increases the absorbable protein of the naan by 110 percent, says Dr. Kwon, who has witnessed the impact of soy in his 28 trips to Afghanistan. "After one month, the children's faces go from looking sick to normal," Kwon says "In three months, we see healthy and happy looking children — all because of soy."

Dr. Kwon is enthusiastic about the expansion of these results by working with WISHH under the new USDA Food for Progress cooperative agreement. "WISHH has the technical expertise to strengthen the (food) processing sector in the country... We can jumpstart this processing sector."

Increased agricultural productivity will require rehabilitation of watersheds and improvements to irrigation infrastructure. Road repairs and small loan programs for farmers are key to the sustainability of the project. Shelter for Life has worked in these areas in Afghanistan since 1997. "The two decades of war crumbled the infrastructure,"

says Director of International Programs Mustafa Omar. "We are looking at parts of the country that have a history in food production, but are currently unable to do so."

CBI Global based in Columbus, Ohio, acting as agent for The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, will be monetization agent for the project. "Robert Clark at CBI was great throughout the entire proposal process and provided a lot of input," Fritz said. "CBI's monetization work is key to the entire effort."

Building high-speed wireless in Afghanistan out of garbage

Boing Boing

03/04/2010

By Cory Doctorow

Volunteers in Afghanistan—both locals and foreigners from the MIT Bits and Atoms lab—have been building out a wireless network made largely from locally scrounged junk. They call it "FabFi" and it's kicking ass, especially when compared with the World Bank-funded alternative, which has spent seven years and hundreds of millions of dollars and only managed its first international link last summer.

The boys at the Jalalabad Fab Lab came up with their own design to meet the growing demand created by the International Fab surge last September. As usual all surge participants who came from the US, South Africa, Iceland and England paid their own way. Somebody needs to sponsor these people.

For those of you who are suckers for numbers, the reflector links up just shy of -71dBm at about 1km, giving it a gain of somewhere between 5 and 6dBi. With a little tweaking and a true parabolic shape, it could easily be as powerful as the small FabFi pictured above (which is roughly 8-10dBi depending on materials)

Social Headlines

Mullahs and religious elders tapped to promote women's rights

United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)

03/01/2010

By Sayed Barez

The Government of Afghanistan has initiated a programme tapping Mullahs and religious elders in making people aware of women's rights in accordance with Islamic laws, the Afghan institutional law and international human rights law.

The Afghan government programme titled 'The Role of Spiritual Leaders for Promotion of Women Rights' – which is implemented by the Ministry of Haj and Religious Affairs (MoHRA) and the Ministry of Women Affairs (MoWA) – is supported by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) through its Gender Equality Program (GEP).

Afghanistan's population is almost entirely comprised of traditional communities which are strictly attached to their local cultures and customs.

Followed for generations, some of these traditions and local cultures deprived women of many of their rights. Islamic values of women are not very well understood and international laws, including the human rights law, are still unheard of in most rural areas in Afghanistan.

Religious scholars and Mullahs have always been the only ones people trust. They are respected, believed and highly welcomed as elders while the latter, on their part, do their best to keep their values as wise and honest leaders of the community.

The programme started in Balkh province in late 2009 when 250 Mullahs from five districts came together and went through a series of trainings, knowledge-building and participatory discussions on women's rights according to Islam.

The programme aimed to disseminate awareness mainly to men in the communities through their Mullahs and religious leaders. The four key issues identified as priorities to be promoted were early marriage, forced marriage, gender-based violence, and inheritance.

"In Afghanistan, when people are given instructions based on their religious values, they will easily listen and accept them. It is highly believed that such programmes will reduce domestic violence through involving religious leaders. This has been identified as a key strategy," said Mawalwi Abdul Hanan, a participant.

When Mullahs preach avoidance of violence against women during the Friday sermons in

mosques, their listeners are the men who become the promoters of the advice of their religious leaders as extracted from the Holy Quran. The men, therefore, help shape their communities accordingly.

"The programme was really successful. It is a very wise approach to rural areas. Replication of this initiative in the other provinces has been proposed by the respective governmental authorities and we are hoping to be able to do the same in other provinces in the future," said Ahmaduddin Sahibi, Provincial Coordinator of UNDP/Gender Equality Project in Mazar-e-Sharif.

Afghanistan's rural population, who have been hit hard by the continuous Afghan war, do not always believe everything they hear except when it comes from elders whom they know and believe.

Afghanistan bans coverage of Taliban attacks

Reuters

03/01/2010

By Sayed Salahuddin and Hamid Shalizi

KABUL - Afghanistan on Monday announced a ban on news coverage showing Taliban attacks, saying such images embolden the Islamist militants, who have launched strikes around the country as NATO forces seize their southern strongholds.

The announcement came on a day when the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) fighting the Taliban reported six of its service members had been killed in various attacks.

Journalists will be allowed to film only the aftermath of attacks, when given permission by the National Directorate of Security (NDS) spy agency, the agency said. Journalists who film while attacks are under way will be held and their gear seized.

"Live coverage does not benefit the government, but benefits the enemies of Afghanistan," NDS spokesman Saeed Ansari said. The agency summoned a group of reporters to announce the ban.

The move was denounced by Afghan journalism and rights groups, which said it would deprive the public of vital information about the security situation during attacks.

"Such a decision prevents the public from receiving accurate information on any occurrence," said Abdul Hameed Mubarez head of the Afghan National Media Union, a group set up to protect Afghan journalists, who often complain of harassment by

authorities.

"The government should not hide their inabilities by barring media from covering incidents," said Laila Noori, who monitors media issues for Afghanistan Rights Monitor, the country's main liberties watchdog. "People want to know all the facts on the ground whenever security incidents take place."

The Afghan government banned reporting violence for a single day during a presidential election last year, but otherwise had not had formal restrictions on filming security incidents. However, journalists have occasionally been beaten by security forces while filming at the scene of incidents in the past.

SUICIDE BOMBER

Two blasts hours apart on Monday killed at least six people in the southern city of Kandahar, birthplace of the Taliban whose fighters are being targeted in a renewed push by NATO-led troops.

One ISAF member was killed in one of the Kandahar strikes. In various attacks in the country, five other ISAF service members were also killed, the force said.

NATO-led troops launched an offensive last month to drive the Taliban out of their strongholds as part of a plan to hand control of the country to Afghan forces before a planned U.S. troop drawdown that would begin in July 2011.

U.S. General Stanley McChrystal, the ISAF commander, visited Marjah in Helmand province, the town seized by U.S. Marines in the offensive, one of the biggest operations of the eight-year-old war.

He was joined by Afghan Vice President Karim Khalili and Helmand Governor Gulab Mangal, who met hundreds of local residents at a "shura," or traditional council meeting.

"The most important thing is to bring peace and stability to the people in Afghanistan. This is our priority. This is a promise," Khalili told the gathering. But not all were impressed.

"You promised not to use big weapons. Why was my house destroyed?" asked Abdul Kader, a white-bearded village elder.

McChrystal told reporters the goal was to build a government in the area that villagers would embrace: "In the near term, they have to feel represented, they have to feel it's fair."

There could be 200-300 fighters left in the town "who were Taliban two weeks ago," McChrystal said. "Now, whether they still are is a personal choice for each of them. Some may become sleeper cells waiting for someone to tell them what to do. Some may

just put the gun away and see what's going to happen."

Fighters have responded with attacks in other parts of the country, using roadside bombs and suicide attacks.

In the past week, the Taliban have carried out four big attacks killing at least 29 people and wounding scores more.

On Friday, two suicide blasts and a two-hour shootout between Afghan forces and the Taliban rocked the capital Kabul, killing 16 people and wounding 37. Among those killed were Indian government employees and an Italian diplomat.

In Monday's first blast, a suicide bomber blew up a car as NATO-led troops passed in convoy on a road several miles from Kandahar airport, a key NATO base. Mohammad Ibrahim, a doctor in a Kandahar hospital, said four civilians were killed.

A NATO helicopter evacuated the wounded, and a bridge close by was badly damaged, a Reuters journalist said.

Hours later, a car packed with explosives blew up outside Kandahar's main police station, killing a police officer and wounding 16 people.

Marjah's residents wary of U.S. after Taliban ouster

McClatchy Newspapers

03/01/2010

By Dion Nissenbaum

MARJAH — One by one, the men of Marjah tentatively approached the high-ranking Afghan official with their complaints.

One man accused U.S. Marines of insulting Afghan men by conducting intrusive searches. Two worried that the government would tax their poppy harvests — just like the Taliban did. A fourth was told he'd receive financial compensation for relatives killed during the fighting.

With U.S.-led forces now in control of the one-time insurgent stronghold in southern Afghanistan, President Hamid Karzai's deputy flew from Kabul on Monday to reassure Marjah residents that the Taliban were gone for good — and that things would slowly get better.

"We will be with you," Second Vice President Karim Khalili told more than 400 men at the biggest community gathering since the Taliban were pushed out.

"We will not abandon you," Khalili said. "It is not like it was in the past where they cleaned a place and left. No. We will stay — and we will fight."

Now that NATO forces have secured Marjah, the challenge is installing a credible, competent local government that can regain the trust of skeptical residents.

"What I think we've got to do is try to move fast enough to try to meet expectations, but carefully enough that we're not in any way . . . blind to some of the nuances that have to be worked through," said Army Gen. Stanley McChrystal , the head of coalition forces, who joined Khalili in walking down Marjah's main street as Marines threw candy to children and Afghan soldiers kept guard.

There was not much public jubilation when Khalili walked down Marjah's main street with a group of Afghan security forces and NATO officials, passing shuttered shops and austere town buildings, which U.S. Marines are transforming into military compounds.

At the afternoon shura, residents greeted Khalili with tepid applause.

Throughout the day, Khalili urged Afghans to be patient and give Karzai's government a chance to win their support.

"You've got to give us time." Khalili told more than 150 Helmand province leaders who greeted the vice president at the provincial government compound in Lashkar Gah .

In the coming days and weeks, with U.S. Marines providing a backbone of security, Afghan officials will reopen schools, expand the valley's critical irrigation system and set up the government. The biggest challenge is introducing an Afghan police force that doesn't demand bribes and undermine confidence in the new officials.

"It's going to be a test for the government to demonstrate to the people of Marjah and the people of Helmand that they're not going to put up with the shenanigans that we've seen in the past," said Army Maj. Gen. Michael Flynn , America's top military intelligence officer in Afghanistan . "We're not kidding ourselves. It's not going to be eliminated. But it needs to be reduced so that it's out of their daily lives."

U.S. Marines in Marjah said they're gradually winning trust.

"Every day, more and more residents are coming forward to tell us where there are IEDs (roadside bombs)," said Lt. Col. Cal Worth of St. Louis , the commander of the 1,500-member 1st Battalion , 6th Marine Regiment from Camp Lejeune, N.C. , now based in the heart of Marjah.

While direct battles with the Taliban have come to a halt for now, Worth said the Marines' presence is still felt around town.

Tree plantation drive launched, Projects completed in Badghis, Jawzjan

Pajhwok
03/01/2010

JALALABAD - A tree plantation campaign, covering 26 districts, has been launched in eastern provinces in cooperation with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), officials said on Saturday.

Amanullah Atal, an official of the programme, told Pajhwok Afghan News as many as 250,000 saplings would be planted during the campaign. He said 4,400 farmers in Nangarhar, Kunar and Laghman provinces were distributed the seedlings.

The plants included different fruiting and non-fruiting seedlings. Atal said the farm owners had paid half of the price for the plants during the current year. He added that all the plants had been purchased from the nurseries in Nangarhar province.

President of the nursery owners in Nangarhar Eisa Jan Ateeq Abadyani said around 3.5 million plants had been produced in 100 nurseries in the province. He criticised the government for its alleged failure to stop the import of plants from Pakistan.

Head of the gardening branch of the irrigation department in the province Ziaul Haq Sadiqi told this news agency a large number of nurseries were existed in Khogyani and Shinwari areas of the province. He said they had completely banned the import of plants from Pakistan.

KABUL - Three projects for irrigating 2,500 acres of land in the Aab-i-Kamari district of western Badghis province have been completed, officials said on Saturday.

Water and energy director Eng. Muhammad Yaqub told Pajhwok Afghan News the projects included construction of a canal measuring 815 metres, 620 meters of gabion and a water reservoir.

Costing \$740,000 provided by the ministry of water and energy, the projects took six months to complete, said the director, who added with the canal construction, over 2500 acres of land would be supplied waters.

Elsewhere, two uplift projects were executed in Shebarghan, provincial capital of northern Jawzjan province with financial support from the UNICEF, an official said on Saturday.

UNICEF official Eng. Najibullah Nesari said the projects included the construction of a school building having eight classrooms and digging a well for drinking water. He added the school building had the capacity of accommodating 400 students.

About 150 families would benefit from the well, the official said.

UNICEF officials said they had dug 21 wells in various parts of the province in coordination with Jawzjan education department.

Afghanistan protects newly rediscovered rare bird

The Associated Press
03/01/2010

KABUL — Afghanistan's fledgling conservation agency moved Sunday to protect one of the world's rarest birds after the species was rediscovered in the war-ravaged country's northeast.

The remote Pamir Mountains are the only known breeding area of the large-billed reed warbler, a species so elusive that it had been documented only twice before in more than a century.

A researcher with the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society stumbled upon the tiny, olive-brown bird during a wildlife survey in 2008 and taped its distinctive song. Later, a research team caught and released 20 of the birds — the largest number ever recorded.

On Sunday, Afghanistan's National Environment Protection Agency added the large-billed reed warbler to its list of protected species, which was established only last year.

Mustafa Zahir, the agency's director-general, acknowledged the difficulties of trying to protect wildlife in a country preoccupied with the Taliban insurgency. On Friday, suicide attackers killed 16 people in Kabul, the capital, and thousands of Afghan and NATO forces are fighting to root out the hard-line Islamists from their southern stronghold.

But Zahir, who is the grandson of Afghanistan's former king, said the discovery of the large-billed reed warbler provided some welcome positive news.

"It is not true that our country is full of only bad stories," Zahir said. "This bird, after so many years, has been discovered here. Everyone thought it was extinct."

The bird's discovery in Afghanistan kicked off a small flurry in conservation circles.

The large-billed reed warbler was first documented in India in 1867 but wasn't found again until 2006 — with a single bird in Thailand. The Pamir Mountains, in the sparsely populated Badakhshan province near China, is now home to the world's only known large

population of the bird.

The Afghan environmental agency also added 14 other species to the protected list on Sunday. It now includes 48 species including the rare snow leopard, the Asiatic cheetah and the markhor, a type of wild goat with large spiral horns.

While conservation efforts are in their infancy in Afghanistan, there have been some recent successes. Authorities in Badakhshan last week seized a snow leopard from villagers who had trapped it and planned to sell it. The snow leopard — one of an estimated 150 left in the wild — will be freed once its injuries from the trap are healed, Zahir said.

Ministries to place ban on 'immoral websites' by May 21

Pajhwok

03/01/2010

By Frozan Rahmani

KABUL - The Ministry of Telecommunication and Information Technology in coordination with the Ministry of Information and Culture are going to place a ban on the websites that exclusively circulate pornography by May 21, officials said on Sunday.

Addressing a news conference in this regard, acting minister for the Telecommunication and Information Technology Eng. Amerzai Sangin said the ban would be placed with the help of private internet services providing companies.

Accompanied by Information and Culture minister Syed Makhdum Rahin, Sangin said the internet providing companies would be asked to install the software which could filter the sites containing pornographic or immoral content.

Sangin warned the internet companies of 'legal action' if they failed to install the software by May 21.

On the occasion, Rahin said there were many websites spreading immoral movies. He added such films were leaving negative impact on the society.

"Some money lovers to fill their pockets with money want to destroy the new generation," he said, urging Afghans to use the internet in 'a positive manner.'

According to Sangin, as many as two million Afghans had access to internet being provided by 19 companies.

Head of Insta telecom, Khalid Momand, told Pajhwok Afghan News most of their

customers were using the internet positively. He said they were not misusing the net in their office, but said a limited number of people watched black movies in net cafes. He also voiced his support for the ban on the websites circulating pornography.

Big rise in Afghan child migrants

BBC

03/01/2010

By Imogen Foulkes

United Nations aid agencies are warning of a sharp increase in unaccompanied Afghan children applying for asylum across Europe.

The latest figures from the UN refugee agency show an increase of 60% last year, with more than 6,000 under-18s seeking asylum.

Unicef says there is an urgent need to protect children migrating alone.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges countries to protect children of all nationalities.

In 2008, UN refugee agency figures show, 3,800 Afghans under 18 applied for asylum in Europe.

The UN believes the latest figures are the tip of the iceberg; many unaccompanied minors do not apply for asylum because they fear detention and deportation.

A new study from Unicef, the UN children's agency, reveals a lack of coherent policy within Europe towards child migrants and often a failure to protect them.

Aid workers point to a recent case in which two Afghan boys, one only 13, died trying to hide in lorries travelling from Greece to Italy.

A study of care offered by UK local authorities shows, Unicef says, that unaccompanied children often experience racism, are not believed when they try to tell adults their stories, and struggle with the mental trauma experienced on their journey to the UK.

The UN says much more research into the growing phenomenon of child migrants is needed, but that these initial findings show the need to offer better protection is urgent.

Dip in civilian deaths in first two months of 2010

IRIN

03/02/2010

KABUL - The number of civilian deaths caused by the conflict in Afghanistan in the first two months of 2010 was slightly lower than in the same period in 2009, according to two Afghan human rights groups.

Some 163 civilians died and 187 were wounded in violent incidents in different parts of the country in January and February 2010, compared to 201 deaths in the same period of 2009, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) said.

Ninety-two civilian deaths have been attributed to the armed opposition and 71 to pro-government Afghan and foreign forces, Fareed Hamidi, a commissioner of the AIHRC, told IRIN.

The Afghanistan Rights Monitor (ARM), a non-government rights body, had slightly different figures: 201 civilian deaths in the first two months of 2010 as against 297 in 2009.

ARM said it gathers data from a variety of sources including local and international media, government officials, provincial councils, NGOs and local people. AIHRC said it verifies violent incidents through its provincial offices and a "civilian casualty verification team".

The figures may come as a surprise given the major anti-Taliban military operation which began on 13 February in the southern province of Helmand.

Suicide attacks, improvised bombs, air strikes and crossfire between belligerent parties caused most of the civilian deaths over the past two months, Ajmal Samadi, ARMs director, told IRIN.

He said at least 45 civilians had died in Helmand and Uruzgan provinces, southern Afghanistan, as a result of airstrikes and military operations by pro-government Afghan and foreign forces from 13 to 23 February 2010.

Jeff Lifton, a spokesman of the NATO-led forces in Kabul, regretted the deaths of 15 civilians killed by foreign forces during the offensive in Helmands Nad Ali District; and NATO's top military commander in Afghanistan apologized on 22 February for the death of several civilians in an air strike in Uruzgan Province.

No apology

Taliban insurgents do not usually publically apologize for the harm they cause to civilians, though they claimed responsibility for the assault on a guest house in the centre of Kabul on 26 February in which, according to President Hamid Karzais office, 13 civilians, including six foreigners, were killed.

On 28 February an improvised roadside bomb allegedly planted by the Taliban in Helmands Nawzad District killed at least seven people and injured five others, the Interior Ministry said.

Verbally the warring sides respect civilian protection but in practice they all have killed an alarming number of civilians. Weve had enough empty promises. It is time for all to stop killing civilians, said ARMs Samadi.

A human rights unit of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), which has been tracking civilian casualties since 2007, said it publishes figures twice a year. In January and February 2009 it recorded 290 civilian deaths.

Last year was the deadliest year for Afghan civilians since the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001, according to rights watchdogs and UNAMA, and there are no signs of the conflict abating in 2010, given a major US/NATO troop surge.

30 schemes completed in Sar-i-Pul

Pajhwok

03/02/2010

By Abdul Moeed Hashmi & Zabihullah Ihsas

MAZAR-I-SHARIF/JALALABAD - Thirty uplift schemes have been executed in northern Sar-i-Pul under the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), while work on a 25-kilometre road was launched in eastern Laghman province.

In Sar-i-Pul, the NSP communication officer, Farid Ahmad Sadat, told Pajhwok Afghan News on Thursday the projects were implemented in the Gosfandi district, where 5,500 families would benefit from the projects. Costing more than 18 millions afghanis, the schemes took one year to complete.

The projects included digging of 36 wells, construction of 10 water tanks, 4.5 kilometres road, nine small bridges, seven flour mills, a kilometer canal and conducting literacy and tailoring courses for women.

According to Sadat, 1,300 had so far been inaugurated out of the total 1628 approved projects and work on the rest was underway.

Separately, construction work over a 25-kilometre of road was launched late Wednesday in Qarghaee district of eastern Laghman province.

Governor Lutfullah Mashal said the seven-metre wide road would be constructed in two years at a cost of 8.2 millions US dollars with financial support from the United States of America (USA). The road that links Daronta area with the main road of Laghman, would reduce the traffic burden on the Kabul-Jalalabad Highway, he added.

New course to boost literacy rate of Afghan police force

The Canadian Press
03/04/2010
By Steve Rennie

KANDAHAR - Classrooms in Kabul will soon be filled with Afghan cops learning their ABCs and 1-2-3s.

The U.S. army and Canada's international contracting agency are looking for firms to teach Afghanistan's mostly illiterate police force to read, write and do math.

The new, six-hour-a-day course is meant to speed up efforts to boost the force's chronically- low literacy rate.

As many as 2,000 Afghan cops will be part of a pilot program expected to last six months.

A document posted this week on a pair of websites that advertise Canadian and American government contracts contains more details about the course.

"The Afghan National Police (ANP) is currently 35 per cent literate in their native languages," the document says.

"This low literacy rate hinders its development as it evolves into a modern police force governed by the rule of law...

"In an effort to increase the pace of raising the ANP literacy rate, we seek expansion of current efforts with inclusion of an intensive literacy program."

The U.S. and NATO, working with the Afghan education and interior ministries, now provide literacy training for the Afghan police at 221 spots around the country. Officers spend two hours each day, five days a week, learning basic skills. That's on top of their police work.

The new intensive literacy courses will be held in the capital Kabul, using the Afghan Education Ministry's latest curriculum. Each eight-week class will have 250 students.

The program is expected to start in July and run through the end of the year.

The head of the education division of NATO's training mission in Afghanistan says the courses will bring Afghan cops up to Grade 3 literacy level and somewhere between a Grade 4 and 8 level in math.

"Our hypothesis is that we will see a more rapid gain in literacy by conducting the training in more intensive manner than we see in the non-intensive program," Michael Faughnan said.

Officers enrolled in the intensive program will not do police work during their studies.

Faughnan says the most likely candidates for the pilot program are new recruits that haven't started working as cops yet. That way the police force won't have to fill gaps left by officers going on training.

Interior Minister Hanif Atmar recently approved a new Afghan policing strategy that, in part, identified illiteracy as a problem plaguing the force.

Under the new strategy, the police force will put more emphasis on developing professional and leadership skills, including reading and writing, rather than training beat cops.

That training is already going on. Twenty-three officers recently finished a six-week leadership course in Kandahar. The Canadian-sponsored course taught everything from payroll to how to deal with the public.

Those cops are now back in their detachments teaching colleagues what they learned.

Teaching cops to be able to read their pay stubs will also help cut down on the rampant corruption that pervades the force. A typical officer can see about a third of his salary skimmed off by his superiors.

In turn, many an Afghan has been shaken down by corrupt cops looking to fatten their wallets.

The new policing strategy aims to make the force more professional, and that includes having cops who can read and write.

A competent Afghan police force is a cornerstone to NATO's exit strategy in Afghanistan.

The western military alliance wants to hand over more security to the Afghan force as its

troops pull out of the country.

The Afghan government wants to have 160,000 officers on the force by 2014. That's up from the 97,000 Afghan cops now in service.

Afghanistan launches poppy eradication programme

AFP

03/04/2010

By Andre de Nesnera

KABUL - Afghanistan, source of 90 percent of the world's heroin, Wednesday announced plans to wipe out opium poppies across most of the country, starting in the south where the Taliban have long held sway.

But areas where military operations are underway -- such as Marjah in Helmand province -- would not be targeted until the rebels had been pushed out and development programmes launched, said deputy interior minister Mohammad Daud Daud.

Eradication had begun in other parts of Helmand, scene of a major assault against militants who for years controlled Marjah along with drug traffickers, Daud told reporters.

Programmes had also begun in Nangarhar and Farah provinces, and would soon be launched in Kandahar, another militant hotspot and centre of poppy production, he said.

Daud said 25 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces were free of poppy cultivation by last year.

But he said the eradication programme would take place in 18 provinces as "minor planting" had been reported in some.

Afghanistan's illicit drugs industry is worth up to three billion dollars a year, controlled by militants and gangs who use cross-border routes to smuggle drugs to Pakistan and Iran, and bring arms and fighters back in.

The UN office on drugs and crime said last month that opium production in Afghanistan was likely to fall this year, due to bad weather.

Afghan opium production had already fallen from 8,200 tonnes in 2007 to 6,900 tonnes in 2009, the UNODC said in a report.

The area dedicated to opium cultivation, however, was expected to remain stable after decreasing by 36 percent, from a record 193,000 hectares (480,000 acres) in 2007 to 123,000 last year.

Daud said the campaign was in three stages -- public awareness, prevention of cultivation and, finally, eradication, with farmers offered help in planting alternative crops, including cereals.

The announcement comes after the United States said it was shifting its anti-opium strategy in Afghanistan from eradication of crops to a broader focus involving interdiction and alternative agriculture.

'No school for almost half of Afghan children'

AFP

03/06/2010

KABUL – Almost half of school-age children in Afghanistan do not have access to education, President Hamid Karzai said Saturday as he inaugurated the new school year.

Despite a seven-fold increase in the number of children going to school in the eight years since the repressive Taliban regime was overthrown, 42 percent still do not attend or have access to schools, Karzai said.

"Five million school-age children in our country do not go to school, some because of war or because their schools have been closed by the Taliban or others, some because they do not have the ability to go to schools," he said.

In early 2002, fewer than one million children -- only boys -- attended 3,400 schools across the country, taught by 20,000 male teachers, said education minister Mohammad Farooq Wardak.

By contrast, seven million students -- 37 percent of them girls -- attend 12,500 schools, where 30 percent of the teachers, or 175,000, are women.

"We are still facing a series of serious challenges," Wardak told a ceremony at a secondary school adjacent to the Presidential Palace.

"Forty-two percent of school-age children do not have access to schools and another 11 million of our compatriots are illiterate," he said.

Afghanistan has been suffering some sort of armed conflict for the past 30 years, starting with the Soviet invasion of 1979, through civil war, and, from 1996-2001, rule by the Islamist Taliban who banned girls from education.

This has left a huge knowledge gap that the international community has been trying to

fill, with billions of dollars of aid pouring in since the Taliban were pushed out in a US-led invasion.

But a Taliban insurgency has effectively paralysed the reconstruction drive and in some areas under the insurgents' control, schools have been closed down completely and schoolgirls had acid thrown in their face.

Wardak said that in 200 out of 412 districts across the country there were no girls studying at all, mainly for fear of Taliban attack or because in many rural areas girls have traditionally not been educated.

He said 245 districts did not have a professional female teacher, and only 27 percent of all teachers had minimum professional qualifications.

Roads leading to Herat Airport open

Pajhwok Report

Mar 6, 2010 - 19:30

KABUL (PAN): The Italian Provincial Reconstruction Team opened two new roads to the Herat airport yesterday, NATO said on Saturday.

The 400-meter asphalt roads with safety barriers and signs cost 40,000, the western military alliance said in a statement.

These new roads will regulate the traffic toward the civil and military terminals and facilitate entry and exit procedures for passengers travelling to the international airport increasing efficiency and security, said Brig. Gen. Alessandro Veltri, Regional Command-West commander, at the opening ceremony.

Today represents not just another confirmation of the actual closeness of Regional Command-West to the needs of the population, but it marks the first important step towards an even more ambitious project that aims internationalization of the Herat Airport, said Herat Governor Yusuf Nuristani at the end of the ceremony.