

Afghan News Round Up or August 2013 Compiled by Elayne Jude for Great North News

Burial rites and wrongs, ISAF's unexploded ordnance, overnight bourgeoisie, new tools for old tasks, 1400 sick of cholera

Two leaders, asleep in two beds

Two soldiers, tired in two trenches

Two leaders, smile behind the peace table

Two flags on the graves of the two soldiers.
- Sami Hamed

More follows

Butcher's bill: a burden on the poor

"There are specific instructions from the President to the military institutions about delivering the coffins of those who die in line of duty with utmost respect and care to their families," states Adela Raz, a spokeswoman for President Karzai.

But anecdotal evidence points to widespread official neglect of the bodies of fallen police and army personnel. On average, 10 Afghan soldiers are killed every 24 hours in Afghanistan. Families of dead soldiers, from some of the poorest communities, usually have to collect their own dead, often at enormous expense. The effect on ANSF morale may be disastrous.

Three years ago, Yoldash, aged 35, joined the Afghan police. For \$200 a month, he cooked for his unit and returned home for about two weeks every six months. The last time he came home was June.

Two days after his return to his unit in the western province of Farah in June, Yoldash went to fetch water from a stream about 300m away. He was ambushed and killed by the Taliban. His brother, Gul-Murad, was informed two weeks after the incident by a fellow villager also serving in Yoldash's unit.

So Gul-Murad, taking Yoldash's 7-year-old son Basit with him — "if [the Taliban] are keeping Yoldash alive, they will show mercy for the sake of this child," — took a bus to Kabul. From Kabul they flew to Herat province, and then drove to Farah — all in all, over 1,500 km in distance.

In Farah, Yoldash's unit had no news. So Gul-Murad and Basit asked locals for help in locating Yoldash. A village elder contacted local Taliban, who called back early in the evening. Yes, they had ambushed Yoldash, they reported. His body should be by a mountain ridge not far from where they found him.

When they arrived at the place they found bones. Yoldash's throat was slit. His hands and half his torso were missing. Gul-Murad collected the remains in his shawl and brought them back to the outpost, where he was given an ammunition box to carry the bones. The unit captain told him "you know where the bus station is — go get yourself a ticket." After difficulties at the bus station, Gul-Murad transported his brother's remains by air. The trip cost the family \$1,200 — about six months' worth of Yoldash's salary.

After a social media campaign, two of Yoldash's immediate commanders were arrested and taken to the attorney general's office for questioning on charges of neglect. It has not been determined whether those commanders are still in detention.

ISAF casualties have reduced significantly this year. June, 2013's bloodiest month, saw 27 soldiers killed. On the Afghan side, about 300 soldiers died in the same period — a reported

22% increase from the same month last year. While high-level peace talks have failed to gain momentum, the violence has escalated on the ground. The seasonal closing of Pakistani madrasahs due to summer heat, is thought to be a key reason for the escalation. British officials report the rate of recruits leaving the Afghan army is around 63,000 every year, or more than a third of the current size of the force.

A senior official in eastern Afghanistan told Time magazine recently that when a police officer dies in his area, no one from the local leadership attends his funeral. But if a local Taliban fighter is killed, elders — including members of the provincial High Peace Council, the local branch of a government body tasked with pursuing talks with the Taliban — sometimes flock to the funeral.

"The reason for the lack of fighting spirit and for the high attrition is that the soldiers are not taken care of," says retired army general Atiqullah Amarkhel. "The system is so deep in corruption — it can't even take care of those protecting its survival.

Deadly Legacy of Former Bases

The U.N. has accused the coalition of leaving dangerous explosives behind on its closed bases.

ISAF has committed to a more rigorous approach to clearing unexploded ordnance on its bases and firing ranges, and will revisit bases that have been demolished.

In the first half of the year, nearly 150 people were killed or injured when such munitions detonated, according to a report by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). That's up 53 percent from the same period in 2012. Nearly 80 percent of the victims were children.

United Nations demining officials believe the increase was mainly related to the closing of the hundreds of small ISAF bases, pre-departure. Locals search the abandoned sites looking for anything of value.

Lt. Col. William Griffin, an ISAF spokesman, wrote: "We acknowledge the recommendations

that UNAMA makes and will work to incorporate those recommendations into our plans and procedures. Both UNAMA and ISAF are mandated by the U.N. Security Council and maintain the same goal: to mitigate and end civilian casualties as thoroughly as possible...We have identified potential gaps in procedures, reporting and tracking of firing ranges on current or former ISAF bases and leaders have been directed to increase their oversight in regard to this matter."

U.N. officials treated two cases as emergencies, funding cleanup operations on firing ranges at closed bases, including one where an accident hurt eight civilians. Hundreds of pieces of ordnance including grenades and mortar shells were discovered.

In late 2011 there were about 800 coalition facilities across Afghanistan, according to ISAF figures.

More than 600 of them, mostly small bases, already had been shut down or handed over to the Afghan government by the beginning of 2013, when the closure of larger bases began. Some had informal areas used for practice and sighting in weapons that might now be challenging to define and clear.

Endangered: Afghanistan's middle class

After the Taliban's fall from power, thousands of Afghans found lucrative jobs in Kabul. Now many Afghans' new middle-class lifestyle may be in danger.

In the past decade the middle class in Afghanistan have enjoyed disposable income to spend on eating out, mobile phones, laptops cars.

Much of this embryonic urban middle class is in danger of vanishing once again as more international aid projects and NGOs shut down ahead of transition.

"Young working Afghans like me and my friends are who sustain the local businesses. If we lose our jobs, many of these local businesses will fail," says a graduate of Kabul University's school of economics, who manages a development project run by an aid organisation. He says many of his friends also work for various international aid organisations or projects run by the US military for relatively lavish salaries of \$2,000 to \$4,000 a month. The average per capita income in Afghanistan, according to the World Bank, is \$528.

The high salaries, along with lucrative military and security contracts, have created a financial bubble in Afghanistan, pushing up the cost of living and hothousing the Afghan middle class, especially in urban areas.

Some economists estimate that the Afghan middle class may have grown from almost zero in 2001 to as much as 10 to 15 percent of Afghanistan's estimated population of 27.5 million today. Based on that estimate, somewhere between 2.75 and 4.13 million Afghans now fall into the various levels of the middle class.

"There was an Afghan middle class in the 1970s and '80s, but during the '90s the increased fighting in the country forced most of the middle class families to leave the country or fall into poverty. After 2001 the middle class group has increased," says Mohammad Ismail Rahimi, the general director of policy at the Afghan Ministry of Economy.

Some Afghans believe a strong middle class will be instrumental in promoting national unity and multiethnic political parties, two goals that are critical for long-term peace in the country.

This artificial prosperity, based as it is on the temporary infrastructure of the coalition's civ-mil support structures, may not survive the slow deflation of the financial bubble. The most vulnerable will be the barely established, who have made money but not invested in property or small businesses.

"Less international aid to Afghanistan and not enough attention on private sector investment could quickly result in pushing middle class families to the brink of poverty again," says Hamidullah Noor Ebad, economics professor at Kabul University and member of the Afghan government's economic advisory council.

After Transition; Remote Viewing

US officials are finalising a \$200-million plan to use smartphones, GPS-enabled cameras and satellite imagery to monitor relief projects in areas too remote or unsafe for Americans to visit.

More of the massive U.S. reconstruction effort will be monitored by Afghans, with U.S. officials supervising from a distance. The agency's draft proposal says the new tools will be used "across the entire portfolio" of its nearly 80 major development projects nationwide.

Administration officials say the US must continue to finance development projects to bolster the Kabul government, whose budget remains almost entirely dependent on foreign aid. USAID, which has given more than \$15 billion to Afghanistan since 2001, plans to spend billions more over the next decade on agriculture, energy, health, training and other programs, to be carried out by American and Afghan contractors.

USAID monitors, dependent on military escort, are now confined to a few major cities. They will be reliant on digital tools and Afghan contract workers for information on projects.

The agency has contracted companies to monitor its programs for several years. Occasionally it has used satellite images to measure crop yields. Under the new proposal contractors would hire Afghan monitors to relay information about construction projects using smartphone applications, conduct text-message surveys about health and education efforts, crowd-source opinions about government services and use GPS-enabled cameras to verify activity sites.

While the need for robust oversight of billions of taxpayer dollars is unquestioned, there are concerns about the rapid timescale. The few companies in the field have invested in very longterm teambuilding incountry.

The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, an independent watchdog, said that though Afghan monitors might be better able than Americans to travel safely to project

sites, it was "concerned that the practice may raise new issues such as vetting, accuracy, effectiveness and accountability."

US Afghan relief and reconstruction spending is nearly \$100 billion since 2001. The Government Accountability Office in June 2012 reported "systematic weaknesses in USAID's oversight and monitoring of project and program performance in Afghanistan". In September 2012, USAID's inspector general found that the agency's Afghan monitoring program lacked basic guidelines and management plans for some projects, and was missing key data.

The draft proposal's publication has excited interest among companies for a contract, which will be one of USAID's biggest such contracts ever. Officials expect to begin soliciting bids this year.

IRD has begun recruitment in anticipation of bidding. The Washington-based QED Group is preparing a bid. Both companies have been criticised for mismanagement of previous similar contracts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Cholera outbreak in Badakhshan province

An outbreak of cholera in northeastern Badakhshan province, has infected at least 1400 people. Provincial public health officials confirmed that a 19-year-old girl died of the disease in Derayam district. 25 people are considered to be in a critical condition.

The main reason behind the cholera outbreak was the lack of clean water.

Mobile health care teams have been deployed to the area to provide treatment, and international non-governmental organisations including WHO, UNICEF and Merlin are also providing medical care.

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