

This regular bulletin has sought to find stories, whether good news or bad, about civilian life in Afghanistan, away from the fighting. It's the flipside of the media mantra 'if it bleeds, it leads'. It's compiled by Elayne Jude of Great North News Services

USAID offered a 90-day "trial" contract, with a possible extension, for someone to take "timely, attractive visual images" of USAID projects in Afghanistan for their public relations work.

The copy ran: "In Afghanistan, negative images flood both social and conventional media with little counter. This makes fresh, regularly updated photographs of USAID work . . . critical for effective social media messaging."

"Professional-quality" shots were sought for their Afghanistan public outreach program, including the website, Facebook page, Twitter feed and Flickr photograph feed. USAID are seeking to correct a public image of their work which is negative or misleading.

USAID stated that "news photographs by their very nature focus on the negative." They felt "unable to compete . . . because of lack of skill and security limitations." .

One of the qualifications listed was an ability to do "unlimited travel in country." (as the State Department warns US citizens against inessential travel - see page 2).

After inquiries by the Washington Post, a USAID spokesman e-mailed the newspaper to say the announcement "was to help inform Afghans" about the agency's projects but that it "did not appropriately articulate that purpose and is being reevaluated." It no longer appears on the agency's website.

US warns its citizens against travel to Afghanistan

The US State Department warned its citizens against travel to Afghanistan.

US State's statement reads: "No province in Afghanistan should be considered immune from violence and banditry, and the strong possibility exists throughout the country for hostile acts, either targeted or random, against U.S. and other foreign nationals at any time... Remnants of the former Taliban regime and members of other terrorist organizations hostile to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and foreign nationals remain active in every province of the country...The threat situation in Afghanistan is still considered critical and is expected to remain so through the presidential and provincial elections and the political and military transition in 2014."

According to the State Department, Kabul remains at high risk for militant attacks, including VBIEDs, direct and indirect fire, and suicide bombings, despite numerous security operations and checkpoints by Afghan and coalition forces in and around the city.

Neighbourhood Watch

In the midst of a spate of armed robberies, Kabullis are reported to have made security outposts on the roof of their houses to watch for thieves and protect their property.

In Hangara area several armed robberies are reported every week. The police are not far away but their presence does not make itself felt. Thieves sometimes claim to be members of the security forces before breaking in. Now residents are banding together from dusk till dawn to patrol the streets.

Kabul Police Chief Zahir Zahir has promised night patrols to address the problem.

Bamiyan Buddhas Rebuild Halted

UNESCO has reportedly stopped the unauthorized reconstruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas,

whose destruction in 2001 was an act by the Taleban that came to symbolise their regime in the eyes of the West.

Archaeologists from the German branch of Icomos (the International Council on Monuments and Sites) had started to rebuild the smaller of the two Buddhas.

Michael Petzet, the head of Icomos from 1999 to 2008, reportedly led the team, working with iron rods, reinforced concrete and bricks.

Unesco's assistant director-general for culture, Francesco Bandarin, strongly condemned the project, undertaken without the consent of the Afghan government or the approval of UNESCO

Petzet claimed his team was funded by UNESCO and was an act of preservation. According to Petzet, Afghan authorities were informed of their operation and party to it.

Bandarin says that the ministry of culture of Afghanistan was not unaware of the reconstruction and Icomos Germany was authorised to construct a safety platform on the site.

Polio returns to Kabul

In the city's first case of polio since the Taliban were ousted in 2001, a three-year-old girl from a nomadic family living on the northeastern edge of the city was diagnosed after being admitted to hospital in Pakistan.

Health ministry spokesman, Kaneshka Baktash Turkistani said it was not clear where the girl had contracted the virus, which is endemic in both countries. Kabul city has not had a reported case in 11 years. An emergency polio vaccination campaign was launched immediately. No further cases had come to light in early February.

Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Nigeria are the only countries in the world where polio is still endemic. The number of cases has dropped significantly in Afghanistan in recent years, with most remaining in the insurgent south. The insurgents have allowed polio vaccination teams to visit their areas in recent years. In Pakistan, militants still fear and oppose polio campaigns, branding them as cover for espionage.

Herat Airport Taking Off

Italian aid money will be used to transform Herat airport into the biggest cargo airport in Afghanistan. Nearby supporting infrastructure, Herat Ring Road and Chesht-Herat highway, will also be funded by Italy. Completion is expected by 2017.

A new runway and terminal and a large hangar for airplanes will be built. New equipment for aircraft and for passengers is to be purchased.

The cost of the reconstruction is projected at around \$39 million," said Afghan Minister of Finance Hazrat Omar Zakhilwal.

The Governor of Herat Province, Sayed Fazlullah Wahidi said the projects will be supervised by Afghan organisations.

Herat Uprising Remembered

The protesters saw themselves as a people's movement, demanding a return to Afghan traditions. The Herat Uprising, March 15-20, 1979, was considered to be the first major grassroots insurrection against communism in Afghanistan. It was widely reported in Western press as a massacre of the Soviet advisers in the city, with upwards of 300 reported killed by an Afghan mob. In fact, fewer than ten Soviets died.

The uprising broke out almost a year since the Saur Revolution, in which the People's

Democratic Party of Afghanistan took over the government, killing the previous incumbent and requesting assistance from Moscow, who spent the next eighteen months trying to rein in the fantastically ambitious and factionised party before the coup of Christmas 1979. Many Afghans viewed the new regime with dismay, largely due to the PDAs' fatal underestimate of the importance and persistence of Islam, and its greatest social manifestation, the segregation of men and women.

A particularly sensitive issue was girls' education. Girls at school was one thing; girls being taught by young male teachers was a move too far. Ineffective land reforms by an urban based, foreign educated elite that left the poor worse off added fuel to the fire. Religious leaders led the rebellion, demanding a protest march to the provincial capital, calling for 'death or success'.

In the city, the protesters used whatever objects they could to target the army's 17th division, from cardboard to pitchforks to oil drums. Some insisted that neither rioting nor looting took place - "just shouts of Allahu Akbar!" According to locals, looting was rife and people thought to be of insufficient piety were targeted by the protesters. A week later an aerial bombardment, as part of the campaign to recapture the city, left many dead.

The news of the uprising quickly spread throughout the country. Qayoum Kochai, a political prisoner at Kabul's Pol-e Charkhi prison, still remembers when he heard about the uprising. "It emboldened everyone to see that ordinary people could bring the Khalqis [the communist faction ruling Afghanistan] to their knees."

For the Communist rulers of Afghanistan, it was the beginning of the end.

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