

Afghan News Roundup for July 2013 is compiled by Elayne Jude for Great North News Service

Ironic icon, torturers released, Safi & Safi reinvented, slap gets lethal

Afghan Air Force for the Chop

At the 2013 Paris Air Show, Russia announced the Kamov company's Ka-52 Alligator's readiness for export.

The Alligator can handle "hot-and-high" operating conditions. "Kamov-52 was conceived when Russian experience of combat operations in Afghanistan were quite alive," said the chopper's chief designer, Sergey Mikheev.

Today, most of Afghanistan's air force consists of Russian helicopters, mainly M-17 medium transports and Mi-35 Krokodil gunships.

During the occupation the Soviets used Mi-24 gunships to hunt down the Mujahedeen, who included current President Hamid Karzai. After the Soviet withdrawal, Afghan Air Force Mi-24s fell into the hands of all sides in the civil war, some remaining usable until 2001. As many Afghan pilots have experience of Russian gunships, the country's nascent air force began purchasing Mi-35s and an updated Mi-24 in 2008.

During the present war against the Taliban, Afghan and coalition helicopters have mainly faced the threat of rocket-propelled grenades, rather than the more deadly shoulder-launched surface-to-air weapons.

Mikheev said Russian designers had decided to put more armour on the Ka-52. "A lot of time has passed since [the occupation], but right now we still see that all those solutions were essential, quite essential."

In addition to flying 11 Mi-35s, the Afghan Air Force has more than 50 Mi-17 Russian-made transport helicopters with 30 more on order. In May, Afghan pilots were cleared to use the Mi-35's twin-barreled Gryazev-Shipunov GSh-23 cannons, providing the air force with new ground-attack capabilities.

The Russian air force plans to phase out its Mi-24 fleet by 2015, to be replaced by the Mil Mi-28 Havoc and Ka-52s.

Aircraft purchased for Afghanistan by the Pentagon includes a new \$554 contract for a batch of 30 Mi-17 helicopters from Rosoboronexport. The U.S. Congress has protested the purchase of weaponry from Russia because of her support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The 2013 National Defense Authorization Act included an amendment blocking the Pentagon from spending any funds with Rosoboronexport, but allowed the Secretary of Defense to waive the clause "if the Secretary determines that such a waiver is in the national security interest of the United States."

"Given current timelines, the department has determined that Rosoboronexport is the only viable means of meeting ANSF requirements", a Pentagon spokesman told RIA Novosti in April.

Not Guilty

A court reversed the convictions of three Afghans jailed for torturing a young relative who had refused to become a prostitute.

In 2011 Sahar Gul was bought at around 13 from her stepbrother for \$5,000 and forced to marry. When she refused to consummate the marriage, her in-laws locked her in a basement, where they starved her, burned her, pulled out her fingernails and twisted her skin with pliers. She was discovered in December 2011 in the cellar.

Three of her in-laws were convicted in 2012 of attempted murder, and sentenced to 10 years in prison. The convictions were upheld on appeal.

Last month the Supreme Court sent the case back to the appeals court, saying that the violence appeared to warrant convictions for assault, not attempted murder.

The appeals court agreed, voiding the convictions and ordering that the defendants Sahar Gul's mother-in-law, sister-in-law and father-in-law be set free.

Afghan women's rights activists said they would press to have the three defendants retried.

"There's smoke coming out of my hair. I am so angry," said Manizha Naderi, the executive director of Women for Afghan Women. "This poor girl was in the basement for months. If she wasn't rescued, she would be dead. She was starved and burned and had her fingernails pulled out. How is this not attempted murder?"

If the case had once served as a warning, it

will now encourage conservative politicians and mullahs to push harder against the rights of women, Ms. Naderi and other activists said.

Building Beyond the Conflict

Ace Hardware has become the first American business to announce a partnership with an Afghan corporation to open a franchise in the country.

At a press conference in Kabul at the end of May, the group Safi & Safi, represented by Najib Safi and Abdul Karim Safi, announced a multimillion-dollar partnership with Ace.

Safi & Safi is an offshoot of the powerful Safi Group, which runs hotels, malls and an airline in the country. After a decade of war their reputation with Afghans is somewhat tarnished. This new venture is seen by the group as an opportunity to make good the damage.

"The Afghans' perceptions toward the Americans in terms of what they did in rebuilding Afghanistan is unfortunately not very positive," said Karim Safi. "Ace is something that will bring [quality] standards, service and job opportunities."

The country and its partners hope that the private sector can ease the loss of international aid through investment and development. The deputy commercial officer at the U.S. embassy in Kabul said Afghanistan is entering a critical phase of development, and that the U.S. government will assist the Afghans to help entice new companies into the country.

Ace allows its franchises to incorporate locally made products as 40 percent of their inventory provided those products meet company standards.

Safi & Safi paid \$1 million for a licensing fee, and they plan to invest \$40 million to \$50 million more in the next 10 years. 10 to 15 stores are planned, the first to open by the end of the summer in Mazar-e-Sharif. A main distribution centre will be located in Kabul.

The Safis hope to expand their business to Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan an idea Ace Hardware encourages.

Most of the financial burden falls on the individual franchises, but Ace gives them a "toolbox of training and support."

"We work with them with retail support, logistic, distribution training and consumer marketing training," he said.

"We are making history," said Bob Moschorak, president of Ace Hardware International. "It's the first U.S. franchise to make it to Afghanistan and the first time Ace is in that part of the world."

His advice to other U.S. companies setting their sights on Afghanistan: "You have to align yourself always with the right partners, otherwise you are always doomed for failure. We go in with local entrepreneurs who already know the landscape and are used to operating in the country."

Ace plans to open its first store in Iraq later this month.

"Madrasa" screened in Kabul city

After much controversy, the Afghan film "Madrasa" was screened in Lycee Esteqlal high school in Kabul.

The screening followed lobbying by filmmakers, media agencies and some Afghan MPs to overturn a government ban in response to pressure from Iran.

The film was due to be screened in a French cultural centre in Lycee Esteqlal two years ago. The Iranian and French embassies protested, and the screening was abandoned.

Asad Sikandar, Madrasa's director, said that the main scenario of the film remains unchanged. Some content has been deleted.

The film's central core is the difficulties faced by the children of illegal Afghan immigrants abroad in getting into the education system of their host countries.

A trailer is available on YouTube:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XH14GIDqWAK>

17 Indians

The Afghanistan Investment Support Agency (ASIA) has announced that 17 Indian companies have agreed to invest in several sectors of the Afghan economy.

Mining, Information Technology (IT), agriculture and livestock industries and logistics are the fastest growing sectors in Afghanistan and most likely to have attracted the Indian interest. The Indo-Afghan trade is likely to cross the \$1 billion mark within the next two years.

AISA officials believe that the amount of foreign investments in the Afghan economy will increase significantly

in the wake of the Indian commitment.

Amar Sinha, the Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan, stressed the importance of Indian investments for Afghanistan and the benefits of such investments for the Afghan economy.

"Several officials from small and big companies have showed their interest in investing in Afghanistan. I feel, such investments are extremely important for the Afghan economy," said Mr. Sinha.

The announcement comes less than week after a Kazak-Afghan business conference in which eight Kazak companies signed contracts with Afghan partners. The news from India indicates that sustainable growth is possible despite the transition away from ISAF-based employment and commercial activity, and may help to ease national anxiety about Afghanistan's economic future.

Cosmetic Row

A row over cosmetic shops for women has claimed the life of a local mayor.

Abdul Rassoul, district mayor of Deh Salah in the northern province of Baghlan, was gunned down by a shopkeeper during a raid late on July 6. Rassoul was shot three times and pronounced DOA at a local hospital. Police launched a manhunt to capture the suspected killer, who fled the scene and has not been seen since the incident.

Rassoul acted on his own and without any official sanction in trying to shut the shops. At one of those shops he encountered a shopkeeper who had a gun and opened fired on him.

An ulema, or Islamic council, in the district issued a fatwa last month ordering the immediate closure of all cosmetic shops in Deh Salah. The hard-line clerics argued that the sale of cosmetics was "un-Islamic" and the presence of the shops promoted adultery. Ulema members reportedly threatened to burn down the shops if the mayor did not act.

Cosmetic-shop owners in Deh Salah have defended their right to sell their products, accusing the clerics of trying to bring back the extremist practices of the Taliban era.

Under the Taliban, women were banned from using any form of cosmetics, including fragrances and nail polish. Women who broke the laws were publicly beaten.

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