

A round-up by Chris Graham

Economic news

A plan for a natural gas pipeline from Turkmenistan, through Afghanistan and Pakistan, to India has moved a step closer. Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Turkmen President Gurbanguli Berdimukhamedov have agreed to speed up implementation of the plan, and also to construct a railway linking the two countries. Power lines to be built by the end of 2012 will allow Turkmenistan to supply Afghanistan with 70 percent of its electricity needs. Electricity exports to Afghanistan could reach more than 1.6 billion kilowatt hours per year.

The gas pipeline across Afghanistan, projected to ship 33 billion cubic metres a year, is backed by the United States. Afghanistan could earn more than \$1 billion annually in transit fees, and maintaining the pipeline could provide jobs for 50,000 people in Afghanistan alone.

Pakistan and Afghanistan plan to implement a delayed transit trade deal that would help Afghanistan boost its trade and economy from the middle of June. The US-sponsored trade accord signed in October 2010 was to be implemented in February but was delayed because of a failure to agree on bank guarantees for Afghan goods

For the first time, the Mazar-e-Sharif power and fertiliser plant will be provided with gas from the northern city of Sheberghan through a new gas pipeline. The construction gas pipeline will cost \$53 million. As well as helping increase the production of fertiliser the project, which provides electricity to Mazar-e-Sharif, will ensure gas delivery to the plant for years. Work on the gas wells in Sheberghan is also in progress and three gas wells have been prepared for extraction. The Mazar plant, built in 1974, used to produce 400 tonnes of fertiliser and six megawatt of electricity per day.

US investment company JP Morgan Capital Markets has raised \$40 million from investors in Europe, Asia and the US for a planned Afghan gold mine. Investors hope that five metric tons of gold, worth over \$200 million, will be extracted. According to reports, there is nearly \$1 trillion in untapped mineral deposits in Afghanistan,

Iran says Tajikistan is responsible for the long delay of the launch of an Afghan-Iranian-Tajik television project. In 2006, presidents Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan, Mahmud Ahmadinejad of Iran, and Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan agreed to launch a joint Persian-speaking television channel called Navrooz-TV. The project has still not been implemented. According to the agreement, Tajikistan was responsible for providing a suitable building for Navrooz TV's television broadcasting centre, Iran was to provide all the necessary equipment and studios, while Afghanistan was to provide a satellite channel in Persian. Iran says the necessary equipment for Navrooz-TV was brought to the Tajik capital long ago, but Tajik officials responsible for the project are avoiding meetings and talks about the final steps needed to

launch the joint television channel. Many of the people in Afghanistan, Iran, and Tajikistan share cultural and linguistic similarities.

A newly-restored dam is helping farmers in southern Kandahar province grow food instead of the opium poppy, which needs less water than other crops. The vast Dahla Dam is Afghanistan's second-largest dam. Since 2008, Canada has put C\$50 million (\$53 million) into the scheme.

Coalition plans to pull out of Afghanistan are being hampered by theft and fraud totalling nearly \$1bn, the Independent on Sunday has reported. Following a \$1bn fraud at Kabul Bank, the IMF is now refusing to extend any more credit to the war-torn country unless an agreement can be reached on preventing future loans from being stolen.

On other battle fronts

Britain's former ambassador to Afghanistan, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, says the tactics adopted by the US commander, General David Petraeus, are counter-productive and profoundly wrong. Petraeus is due to leave Afghanistan to become CIA director this summer.

Russian diplomat Zamir Kabulov says the situation in Afghanistan may be aggravated by the withdrawal of the international coalition from the country. He said the beginning of the transfer of control from NATO forces to Afghan authorities will step up tensions, and that Afghan forces have not been prepared to assume responsibility for the country's security.

The New York Times reports that NATO and Afghan forces pushed back hundreds of Taliban fighters from a district centre in north-eastern Afghanistan just hours after the fighters had seized control part of the same area. About 300 insurgents had begun surrounding the district centre of Do Ab in Nuristan Province four days previously. The militants overran the eastern part of the town, destroying a government building, a mosque and a health clinic with rocket strikes. The Taliban victory may have been short-lived but represented a continuing effort by militants to grab and hold land in the province left vacant by the withdrawal of American forces.

As the United States prepares to take some troops out of Afghanistan this July, an ambitious program to persuade insurgents to leave the fight has managed so far to attract only 1,700 converts over the past ten months, reports CNN, but the killing of Osama bin Laden may convince more to turn. The United States and its allies have contributed \$141 million to the program of amnesty and reintegration. Estimates are that 20,000 to 25,000 fighters remain in the field, despite efforts to persuade both Taliban leaders and foot soldiers to cross over. Both the Washington Post and the German magazine Der Spiegel have reported on meetings between US officials and representatives of the Taliban that have taken place in Germany to discuss some form of peace negotiations.

Pakistani security agencies are carrying out a sweeping campaign across the country to capture the al-Qaida activists and sympathizers as it faced embarrassment after the US Navy

SEALs killed Osama bin Laden on May 2. The al-Qaida No. 2 Aiman al-Zawahiri may be the target as CIA believes he may also be hiding in Pakistan.

Afghan president Hamid Karzai has ordered that only Afghan forces may carry out special operations and night raids, and not NATO troops. He also said the international coalition should not proceed with any raids that have not been coordinated beforehand with the Afghan side.

And finally....

Only a decade ago cricket did not officially exist in Afghanistan, but an Afghan national side has just completed a tour of Pakistan. They played three one-day matches against Pakistan's second team in the capital Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Faisalabad. Cricket was introduced to Afghanistan by refugees who learned the game in camps in Pakistan after fleeing the 1979 Soviet invasion.

Many Afghans believe the number 39 is unlucky. People have changed their phone numbers and addresses and now car owners are changing their number-plates. Traffic authorities in Kabul blame car dealerships for starting the craze. Car dealerships and those who work for the mafia started the rumours about 39 so they could buy cars with 39 plates cheaper and sell them back for higher prices after changing the plates, said an official at Kabul's Traffic and License Registration department.