

Afghanistan news round up for December 2011  
US Air Force awards Afghan plane contract  
The United States Air Force has awarded a contract to supply a small fleet of attack planes to Afghanistan. The Defense Department said the Air Force had awarded a contract worth \$355 million to Sierra Nevada Corp for 20 light air-support aircraft, single-engine turboprop aircraft that will serve as both trainers and ground-attack planes for Afghanistan's nascent air force. Sierra Nevada partnered Brazil-based Embraer SA to offer the Super Tucano, currently in service with Brazil, the Dominican Republic and Colombia. Rival aircraft manufacturer Hawker Beechcraft Corp had offered the AT-6, a derivative of a training plane that the US military currently operates, but the Air Force excluded the AT-6 from the running. (Wall Street Journal)  
Afghanistan oil deal with China  
Afghanistan's cabinet has agreed a deal with China National Petroleum Corp (CNPC) for the development of oil blocks in the Amu Darya basin. The deal for drilling and a refinery in the northern provinces of Sar-e Pul and Faryab will be the first international oil production agreement entered into by the Afghan government for several decades. In 2008 the Metallurgical Corp of China signed a contract to develop the huge Aynak copper mine south of Kabul, which is due to start producing by the end of 2014. State-owned CNPC and joint venture partner Watan Group, a diversified Afghan company, will explore for oil in three fields in the basin, Kashkari, Bazarkhami and Zamarudsay, which are estimated to hold around 87 million barrels of oil. CNPC will pay a 15 percent royalty on oil, 20 percent corporate tax and give up to 70 percent of its profit from the project to the Afghan government. The mines ministry said in October that the deal was likely to result in government revenues of \$5 billion over the next ten years (Reuters). The contract, which covers the north-eastern provinces of Sari Pul and Faryab, is the first of several such blocks to be put on the market. Bidding information for blocks in neighbouring Balkh province will be released at the end of February, and for the western Herat province by next summer. (AP) China, Afghanistan sign agreement on bilateral co-operation  
Chinese Ambassador to Afghanistan Xu Feihong and Afghan Foreign Minister Zalmai Rassoul have signed an agreement on bilateral economic and technical co-operation. The main projects include the reconstruction and equipping of the Jamhooryat Hospital in Kabul, the reconstruction of the Parwan Irrigation Canal, construction of the Conference Hall within the Arg premises (Afghan Presidential Palace), the reconstruction of the Ministry of Education's Centre for National Science and Technology, the reconstruction of the Ministry of Higher Education's guest house, the construction of the department of the Chinese Language in Kabul University and the provision of 100 ambulances to the Ministry of Public Health. Since 2001, the People's Republic of China has provided a total amount of 200 million US dollars to the reconstruction projects in Afghanistan. (Xinhua)  
Iran to supply fuel to Afghanistan  
Iran is to supply Afghanistan with Iranian fuel oil. Up to one million tons a year of gasoline and jet fuel will go to Afghanistan. (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty)  
Afghanistan wants help to kick-start mining boom  
Afghanistan wants more Australian help to kick-start their post-war economy with a mining boom. Afghanistan, like Australia, is rich in natural resources - iron ore, copper, gold, lithium, coal, uranium, oil and gas. Chinese and Indian companies are already planning to exploit these resources. (ABC News)  
Afghanistan opens first major train service  
Afghanistan's first major rail link with Uzbekistan opened last month with a 47-mile (75-kilometer) trial run. This long-awaited service should speed up the US military's crucial supply flow and become a hub for future trade (Associated Press). The Asian Development Bank wants to raise \$1bn to expand the newly-completed stretch of railway into a countrywide

network to export iron ore and copper to global markets. (Financial Times)

Afghan coal mine explosion kills eleven

An explosion at a coal mine in northern Afghanistan has killed eleven miners, all working at the site without government permission. The men died when an explosion triggered a collapse at the mine in Baghlan province. Conditions in Afghan coal mines can be dangerously primitive, but the country is planning to sell extraction rights for up to five mines every year until the departure of the last foreign combat troops in 2014. (AFP)

Politics causes traffic jams

Private hauliers, who carry almost half of all cargo bound for the 140,000 foreign troops in land-locked Afghanistan, have been held up due to last month's decision by the Pakistan government to close key supply routes to NATO traffic. This follows air strikes that killed at least 24 soldiers at two remote border posts in the tribal district of Mohmand, near the Afghan border. (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty)

UAE, Britain announce Afghan highway project

The United Arab Emirates and Britain have signed an agreement to build an important highway in Afghanistan. (AFP)

Afghan Army increases to 180,000

Afghan armed forces now number 180,000 troops, expected to increase to 195,000 by October this year. Two more provinces, Samangan and Daikundi, are to be handed over to Afghan control (Tolo News). A total of 500 new graduates joined the Afghan National Police (ANP) in Herat province last month. (Xinhua)

Afghan bank chief focuses on Kabul Bank

Noorullah Delawari, recently re-appointed as head of the country's central bank, has put fixing troubled Kabul Bank at the top of his list of priorities. Delawari says that tighter supervision is needed for Afghan banks, import activity should be brought into the banking system. He also envisages negotiations with a major company to create a dry port. (Reuters)

Overstretched US drone pilots face stress risk

Flying drone aircraft over Afghanistan from the comfort of a military base in the United States is much more stressful than it might seem, even for pilots based at home. America's insatiable demand for drone technology is taking a heavy toll on Air Force crews, with just under a third of active duty pilots of drones like the Predator reporting symptoms of burnout and 17 percent showing signs of "clinical distress." (Reuters). The Central Intelligence Agency suspended drone strikes targeting low-ranking militants in Pakistan last month in an effort to mend badly frayed relations with the South Asian nation (VOA News). The K-MAX, an unmanned helicopter capable of carrying more than 3,500 pounds (1.6 tonnes) of cargo, has begun supplying troops in Afghanistan. (AFP)

US deal with Taliban breaks down

A tentative accord with Taliban negotiators has broken down due to objections from where the Taliban planned to open an office. This would have included the transfer of five Afghans from US detention at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and the Taliban's public renunciation of international terrorism (Washington Post). Afghan President Hamid Karzai has said he will back the opening of a Taliban liaison office in Qatar to try to help consolidate the peace process. (BBC News)

Congress calls on Twitter to block Taliban

American congressmen are calling on Twitter to block Taliban propagandists from the micro-blogging site. Twitter feeds regularly feature boasts about the deaths of "cowardly invaders" and "puppet" Afghan government forces. In 2008 Google agreed to tighten its rules for hosting videos on YouTube after complaints that the site hosted films from al-Qaeda and other Islamist terrorist movements showing attacks on American forces in Iraq. However, Twitter may reject the move after pointing out that, unlike al-Qaeda, the Taliban movement is not registered by the State Department as a foreign terrorist organisation. (Telegraph)

Afghan soccer team makes tournament final

Afghanistan's national soccer team, nick-named the Lions of Khorasan, are being fêted despite losing 4-0 to hosts India in the final of the South Asian

Football Federation Cup. The turning-point of the game came when India were awarded a penalty and the Afghan goalkeeper was sent off for protesting the decision. The Lions beat Nepal 1-0 in their semi-final in New Delhi, just days after a twin suicide attack killed dozens, including several family members of team players. (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty)

Afghanistan's first rugby tournament Afghanistan has held its first official rugby tournament. While cricket and football have already gained a strong following in the country, enthusiasts believe Afghans are even better suited to the rough and tumble of the rugby field. Rugby is more akin to the national sport buzkashi, a kind of polo played with the carcass of a headless goat. Ten teams from four different provinces gathered in central Kabul for the sevens competition, the first since the Afghan Rugby Federation affiliated to the Asian Rugby Football Union. (AFP)

Afghan women use boxing to fight stereotypes During the Taliban's oppressive rule in the 1990s, Afghan women were not allowed to work or get an education, much less take part in sports. Now a group of young women in Kabul are not only learning to box, are but doing it in the same Kabul stadium that was once used for Taliban executions. (VOA News)

Secret cinema in Kabul Film fans in London and Kabul linked up over the internet last month to watch a classic movie in the latest Secret Cinema event, its first international simultaneous screening. Secret Cinema founder Fabien Riggall is following the example of Australian photojournalist Travis Beard, who organised a secret rock music festival in Kabul to avoid it becoming a target for Taliban militants. (London Evening Standard)

Afghan children to watch Sesame Street Children in Afghanistan will soon be watching the TV series "Sesame Street". More than a third of Afghan children are not enrolled in primary school, but those who watch Sesame Street will at least learn the alphabet and get to know their numbers. (Reuters)