

Afghanistan round-up November 2011 by Chris Graham

The Taliban are targeting mobile phone masts to prevent tip-offs from Afghan civilians. Afghanistan's communications infrastructure has become the latest casualty of the intensified war between Nato and the Taliban, with mobile phone companies reporting crippling attacks on their network of transmission masts. The mobile phone networks are a key battleground in the war on the Taliban as the vast majority of anti-insurgent tip-offs from Afghan civilians are made at night, through phone calls. The phone industry says the damage has been so great that the numbers of hours of coverage available to all phone users has fallen significantly, the first time there has been such a fall. (Guardian). The Taliban and their allies in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region are increasingly using human couriers to replace the ubiquitous cell phone.

Civilian aid to Afghanistan has peaked

A State Department report says that the United States will spend less on development assistance in Afghanistan as it withdraws troops from the country. US economic and humanitarian aid to Afghanistan has fallen from \$4.1 billion in 2010 to \$2.5 billion this year. (Reuters)

Indian PM pledges fair trade in South Asia

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh pledged to promote fair trade in the region at the opening ceremony of the 17th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in the Maldives last month. He described progress made in SAARC as "impressive", and that India is ready for a regional platform to develop telecommunication and lower call rates. Broadcasting and film-making were also promoted by him. Maldivian President Mohamed Nasheed said that SAARC member countries had agreed to direct the SAFTA (South Asia Free Trade Agreement) Ministerial Council to intensify efforts to reduce the sensitive list as well as reduce non-tariff barriers to trade. The establishment of a South Asian Postal Union has also been agreed, as has an agreement on the Rapid Response to Natural Disasters, and an agreement to initiate work on combating maritime piracy in the region. (Xinhua)

Saffron cultivation in Kashmir

A 25- member team from Afghanistan's Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL) is getting specialized training in saffron cultivation in Indian-controlled Kashmir. Apart from Kashmir, saffron is grown mostly in Iran and Spain. While Iran accounts for about 70 percent of total world production, the quality of the Kashmir saffron is considered the best. Saffron bulbs germinate underneath the dry earth and sprout green shoots. In November, the bulbs produce purple flowers spotted with red threads (stigma). The Afghan officials are hopeful that saffron might bring economic benefits, besides helping in image building of the country. (Xinhua)

Afghan mines "no solution" for economic woes

The Afghan government believes it holds a trump card in its estimated \$3 trillion in natural resources. But minerals in the ground are very different to cash in the bank. Assessment, extraction, processing, transportation and sales will take a lot of investment and a long time, bad news for a country that says it expects a \$5 billion annual security bill after the expected pull-out of foreign troops is completed in 2014. Extraction of mineral wealth does not necessarily produce an improvement of life for the local population, according to Thomas Ruttig, co-founder of the Kabul-based Afghan Analysts' Network. Afghan officials claim the country's deposits, including copper and iron ore, oil and gas, niobium, cobalt, gold, molybdenum, silver and lithium, could generate \$3.5 billion a year. (Reuters)

Rebirth of Afghanistan's Banking

Afghanistan's banking industry collapsed during the Taliban years, leaving the country with virtually a cash economy. Of the six state-owned banks, three were illiquid, dysfunctional and nearly insolvent. In 2002, there were three or four versions of the local Afghani currency, including two issued by warlords, and the IMF estimated that hyperinflation was in the range of 495-600%. The turnaround achieved since then has been remarkable. The

currency, which is now a managed float, is stable in a band of 45-50 to a dollar. There are now 17 licensed commercial banks in operation, accounting for a quarter of GDP. The government bonds market is developing, and international reserves have steadily increased to over \$5.5 billion in mid-May. The central bank's 182-day capital notes had a weighted average interest rate of 3.4% in the fourth quarter of 2010. (Forbes India)

Plastic surgery initiative

Returning to the US after working in Afghanistan, an American doctor is setting up a programme to train Afghan medical teams to perform complex plastic surgery. The country has a high number of burns victims, war injured and children with birth defects. Kaveh Alizadeh plans to return in January with two other surgeons and a medical team to perform 30-40 complex plastic surgeries and in the process, teach Afghans how to do them. (VOA News)

Pakistan to give military training to Afghan National Army

The Pakistan Army is to train Afghan National Army and police under the trilateral pacts signed in 6th Trilateral Summit held in Istanbul last month. (Xinhua)

Female cadets sign on for Afghan Police

In a class of almost 300 Afghan men, Tamana Tanha, 20, is the only woman training to become a non-commissioned police officer in Mehtar-Lam, the capital city in Laghman Province in East Afghanistan. There are only 20 to 30 female police officers in the entire province. (New York Times)

Clinton fights for Afghan women's right

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton says she will fight for women's rights in Afghanistan to advance their status in Afghan society. After ousting the Taliban from power in late 2001, the US-led coalition has made a key priority of improving the rights of women who had been reduced to a second class by the country's former militant rulers. But western troops are due to leave the country by the end of 2014, raising concerns that some of the hard-fought gains could be reversed. (AFP)

Afghan refugee film cancelled

A controversial film depicting the plight of Afghan refugees in Iran has been cancelled at the eleventh hour, sparking allegations that the Afghan authorities had caved into pressure from Tehran. The allegations of Iranian interference, made by film-makers and a member of parliament, reflect widespread suspicions about the behind-the-scenes role Tehran plays in Afghan politics. The film "Madrassa" depicts the struggle of an Afghan refugee as he tries in vain to enrol his daughter in Iranian schools. The film shows Iranians treating the father with contempt because he is Afghan, and eventually imprisoning and torturing him. The film should have been shown in Kabul in mid-October, but was halted at the last minute. (IWPR)

EU censors own film on Afghan women prisoners

The European Union has blocked the release of a documentary film it promoted about Afghan women who are in jail for so-called "moral crimes". The EU says it decided to withdraw the film, which it commissioned and paid for, because of "very real concerns for the safety of the women portrayed". Half of Afghanistan's women prisoners are inmates for "zina" or moral crimes. Some of the women convicted of "zina" are guilty of nothing more than running away from forced marriages or from violent husbands. The documentary tells the story of a 19-year-old prisoner called Gulnaz. After she was raped, she was charged with adultery. Her baby girl, born following the rape, is serving her sentence with her. "At first my sentence was two years," Gulnaz said, "When I appealed it became twelve years. I didn't do anything. Why should I be sentenced for so long?" (BBC)

British troops to cover US withdrawal in Helmand

British forces are planning to take responsibility for a larger area of Helmand province to cover parts affected by the withdrawal of thousands of US troops from Afghanistan. Increasing the so-called "battlespace" will not lead to more British troops being sent to the region, but it will mean the 9,000 personnel still in the province will be spread more thinly. One area the UK is unlikely to return to is Sangin, where 99

British troops have died during some of the bloodiest fighting following the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. (Guardian). The number of US troops in Helmand is to be halved.. (Sydney Morning Herald)<br /><br />Afghan sports trip to US<br /><br />In an effort to promote sport in war torn-Afghanistan and expand Afghan sports leaders' knowledge and understanding of the potential for Afghanistan's youth sports, a group of Afghan sport officials including Afghan Olympic leaders have taken part in a week-long sports orientation trip to the United States. The group visited community-based sports complexes and international training facilities as well as observing youth and collegiate sporting activities. Football, cricket, basketball, volleyball, golf, boxing, taekwondo, weightlifting, bodybuilding, wrestling, chess and other sports are popular among war-weary Afghans besides traditional sports like the ancient game of Buzkashi, which literally translated means "goat grabbing". (Xinhua)<br /><br />Afghan Olympic medallist hopes for gold<br /><br />National Taekwondo champion, 24-year-old Rohullah Nikpai, won bronze at the 2008 Olympics, his country's first ever Olympic medal. He now hopes to win gold in London next year. (Reuters)<br /><br />'Afghan Elvis' gets Kabul women all shook up<br /><br />Dubbed the Afghan Elvis, Farhad Darya may be the only man in the most conservative country on earth who can reduce an audience of women in headscarves to a screaming, waving, whistling throng. In a country where women enjoy few rights and music was banned under the Taliban until ten years ago, Darya is an icon for millions and his popularity was clear at a rare, top-security, female-only show in Kabul recently. Several hundred women, from students to middle-aged mothers, swayed as Darya performed, but they did not dance due to the presence of television cameras. Women dancing in front of strange men is taboo in Afghanistan. Darya, a UN goodwill ambassador described by the organisation as "one of the best role models" in Afghanistan, held the concert to spotlight a campaign against domestic violence. It<br />was the latest in a series of ecstatically received free performances he has given across the country. (AFP)</p>