

An Afghan News Round Up for October 2013 part 2 Compiled by Elayne Jude for Great North News Service Flip-flop factory flop second chance, spare parts to spare, translators transplanted, grubby land-grabbing, and voting, Monopoly style, all on the next page.

“Bad for running, worse for fighting.”

Former US Army Ranger Matthew Griffin wanted to hire scores of factory workers in Kabul to assemble flip-flop sandals from Chinese-made parts trucked across the Pakistan border. Straps would be decorated with the butt ends of AK-47 shell casings. At \$65 a pair, the flip flops were aimed at a high-fashion, affluent US market. Their slogan: Bad for running, worse for fighting.

“We wanted to take something 180 degrees from combat and make a product for people going to a beach and having a good time,” said Mr. Griffin. “Our flip-flops are weapons for change.”

Western entrepreneurs flourished after the Coalition invasion in 2001, setting up Thai restaurants on military bases, beauty spas with armed guards and yoga studios surrounded by blast walls.

Mr. Griffin was inspired to start his business when he toured a Kabul boot factory run by John Boyer, a former U.S. Marine captain and Iraq war veteran, who says he first came to Afghanistan in 2008 to impress his girlfriend. He said making boots for the Afghan army was a bad idea, as Afghan soldiers kept their boots unlaced for easy removal at prayer times. He helped design an alternative: flip-flops, with combat soles from the factory line. Combat Flip Flops was born.

Mr. Griffin turned to China for cheap raw materials, but in November 2011, as the first supplies were ready to ship to Kabul, Pakistan shut its border with Afghanistan.

The shipment was rerouted through Tajikistan, but the first 2,000 flip-flops were too shoddy for the U.S. market. The next Kabul factory commissioned went out of business when it lost its major ISAF contracts.

Mr. Griffin had his supplies shipped from China to his home in Washington State. He spent hours with a hacksaw trying to cut thousands of AK-47 bullet casings before resorting to replica parts. Transforming his garage into a mini-factory, he produced 3,400 pairs of Combat Flip Flops.

Mr Griffin wore a pair for the traditional running of the bulls in July in Pamplona, Spain. Afterward, in the bull ring, he tried—and failed—to hang his sandals on a bull's horns. "Flip-flops are bad for running—and we proved it," he said.

Combat Flip Flops hopes to resume production in Afghanistan. They want to transform a shipping container into a mobile factory in the west of the country. But the export route would lead through Iran, a potential violation of U.S. sanctions.

Mr. Boyer commented: "In Afghanistan you've just got to beat your head against a wall until you understand how things get done."

Where have all the fenders gone ?

A report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction says the Combined Security Transition Command (CSTC-A) spent \$230 million on spare vehicle parts for the Afghan security forces, lost them, then ordered an additional \$138 million's worth, some of which are now sitting in overflowing warehouses .

Lacking a full inventory of what's already available, the agency can't justify why it's purchasing new equipment, the watchdog said. Scant record has been kept of what parts are most needed, where. Officials said they would stop purchasing all nonessential vehicle parts until a comprehensive inventory is completed.

On paper, the office has been gradually reducing the number of parts it says it needs. Investigators said the office still spent \$130 million purchasing thousands of parts which are unlikely to be needed. Only 10 percent of parts are confirmed destined for the Afghan army.

U.S. officials have been relying on the Afghan army to confirm receipt of the components, which are shipped direct. The special inspector general noted that the Afghan army is making a poor job of its own inventory. The central supply depot in Kabul was able to account for only about 45 percent of the parts under its jurisdiction. Some containers sit for up to one year in overflow lots, leaving contents susceptible to theft. The backlog means that the planned delivery of \$12 million worth of additional parts next year could go astray.

In response to the report, U.S. officials have implemented new transfer points and documentation to ensure there is a record of the parts being handed over to the Afghan army.

CSTC-A is planning to turn over purchasing power to the Afghans, which investigators said could be premature.

Since 2002, the U.S. has spent almost \$100 billion on aid to Afghanistan. The special inspector general has repeatedly found examples of waste including \$1 billion on fees and taxes imposed by the local government and \$190 million lost to a corrupt health system.

New Zealand expands resettlement scheme

Nine Afghan interpreters who worked for New Zealand forces in Afghanistan will be given New Zealand residence, along with 26 family members. The Afghans could face a rough ride in their home country over their association with Coalition, after the 2014 withdrawal.

The decision came after public criticism of the New Zealand government's decision in December 2013 to resettle only 30 Afghan interpreters and 64 family members.

Immigration Minister Michael Woodhouse said in a statement: "Our brave New Zealand forces put themselves in harm's way in a foreign country to help the people of Afghanistan. In turn, these local interpreters worked side-by-side with New Zealanders towards the same goal."

The residency package was originally opened only to interpreters who had worked for the New Zealand-led Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Bamyán Province within the previous two years. The government later invited any who believed they had a case to come to New Zealand to request residence as an exception to normal policy.

The government will arrange travel and a settlement programme for the families, over the coming months.

Fortress mentality

Khaled Hosseini, author of "The Kite Runner", has called for more tolerance for the plight of refugees.

The Afghan-born American novelist, in an interview with the AFP , said, "There is a kind of

fortress mentality in the West...I think it's important for us to remember the humanity of these people... Nobody says you have to open your door and the whole world can come and settle in your country. Refugees have not chosen their fate, their fate has been forced upon them."

Khaled Hosseini's new book "And The Mountains Echoed" begins with a disturbing folk tale about a devil kidnapping children in Afghan villages.

The novel begins in an Afghan village in the 1950s and ends in California where Hosseini now lives.

"The war in Afghanistan is not such a looming presence in the book. The impact on a lot of characters is less pressing, less urgent," he said. "It's more a personal story having more to do with human struggles."

Land Grab

The Afghan National Assembly's Commission for Reviewing Government Actions released its report on land-grabbing. The Commission identified small scale offenders, but said that a lack of cooperation on the part of government ministries made it impossible to identify the biggest offenders.

The Commission's report was divided into three tiers of land-grabbing: small amounts in the third tier, medium in the second, and largest in the first.

Zalmai Mujaddadi, the Chairman of the Commission, said that the government had been cooperative in helping identify the petty offenders, but not the serious players. He did not elaborate on how it had failed to cooperate.

The substantive report provided a number of hard facts and names associated with land-grabbing, a chronic and pervasive problem often linked to powerful and influential figures who go unpunished. Over fifteen thousand individuals are involved in land-grabbing, 19 of whom have grabbed thousands of acres.

The Commission read the names of individuals it had been able to identify and place in the second and third tiers. These people were responsible for taking anywhere from a single acre of land to close to 50,000 acres. Some MPs claimed that most of the lands were seized based on

orders from President Karzai.

The Commission noted that unless a dedicated and permanent commission is established for investigating and resolving cases of land-grabbing, offenders will thrive.

Later, the Commission accused the Junbesh Milli Party of large-scale land grabbing in the north. The accusation was categorically rejected by the Party, which is led by Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum, notorious warlord and registered candidate for the Presidential elections.

Bashir Ahmad Tayanj, a spokesman for the party, said the commission's reported findings were part of a conspiracy against his party. With no formal legal injunctions against Junbesh Milli or individuals it names, hard evidence has not been made available.

Gen. Dostum recently apologised for brutalities during Afghanistan's civil war era. He has not yet commented personally on the Commission's allegations against his party.

The Lower House is expected to summon the Ministers of Defense, Agriculture and Livestock, Urban Development and Rural Rehabilitation and the Kabul Municipality, to question them about the Commission's report.

Dog, Car, Old Boot

Meet the Presidential candidates: A bulldozer. A radio. A pencil. A Koran.

For each of the 10 candidates expected to be on the ballot for the April 5 vote, a symbol will be printed on ballot papers alongside the name and photograph of each candidate, to help voters choose their preferred candidate. Only 39 percent of Afghanistan's adult population is literate.

Since 2004, the country's Independent Election Commission (IEC) assigned a symbol to each potential candidate, assuming a high number of contenders. The system was used in Pakistan this year, where some candidates took umbrage at the symbols they were assigned.

After early eliminations, only 10 vetted candidates remain, who are now able to choose their own symbols.

Those running in provincial elections, which will also be held on April 5, had to choose from one of three symbols offered to them. Overall, there were more than 5,000 possible symbols, including a ladder, television set, an ice-cream cone and a bicycle.

Leading candidates and their chosen symbols:

Bulldozer: Gul Agha Sherzai. Hard-hitting style and reputation for getting things done.

As governor of Nangarhar Province, the former warlord completed a series of daunting infrastructure projects in recorded time, including a network of paved roads, solar-powered street lights, and reconstructing the presidential palace in the provincial capital, Jalalabad.

Scales Of Justice: Qutbuddin Helal. Prominent member of the Hezb-e Islami faction. Its leader Hekmatyar has been blacklisted by Washington as a terrorist and Hezb-e-Islami, currently fighting against international and Afghan security forces, has been accused of committing some of the worst human-rights abuses in the 1990s civil war.

Koran: Ashraf Ghani. Western educated technocrat, former finance minister and World Bank official. A canny choice in a conservative culture. Previously, symbols of cultural, religious, or historical importance have been ruled out on the basis that they could give candidates an unfair advantage.

Afghan Flag: Abdul Rasul Sayyaf. Egyptian-trained cleric credited with bringing leading Al-Qaeda figures -- including bin Laden -- to Afghanistan in the 1980s. His symbol showcases his patriotism and leavens his strong connections with foreigners.

Pencil: Qayum Karzai. Older brother of the outgoing President. Stresses the important role education can play in developing the country and putting it on the road to prosperity.

Book And Pen: Abdullah Abdullah. Former foreign minister, has also adopted a symbol of education.

Wheat: Hedayat Amin Arsala. Former finance minister. A symbol of abundance and prosperity. Arsala, US educated, an economist by trade. His choice may be designed to show off his economic credentials.

Peace: Abdul Rahim Wardak. Former minister of defense, most recently a security adviser to the president, chose a white dove flanked by two swords, an Islamic peace symbol. The emblem reads "Allahu Akbar," or "God Is Great." During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, Wardak was a Mujahedin Commander.

Radio: Zalmay Rasul. Former foreign minister and presidential adviser. Might the radio reflect his desire to reach out to the Afghan public?

Peace Doves: Prince Mohammad Nader Naim. Grandson of former King Zahir Shah, a close aide to the former monarch, who died in Kabul in 2007.

with thanks to Wall Street Journal, Washington Times, Xinhua, Khaama Press, Tolo News and Radio Free Europe