

Afghan News Roundup: February 2013 compiled by Elayne Jude for Great North News Service

Going home and what to carry, dib-dib in Dari, behind the veil and on the catwalk, electronic update for Kabul.

New stories about Afghanistan centre on the logistics - and foreign policy implications - of shipping home the matériel of a decade of warfighting, and the uncertainty and anxiety left behind. Finding good or even just 'normal' news away from the frontline feels more and more like mood music on the Titanic. Most news agencies are giving huge attention to the success of the low budget documentary, Buzkashi Boys. Of which, absolutely nothing below.

### **Retrograde; the Great Afghan Salvage Op**

As ISAF winds down towards 31 December 2014, its military assets - everything from the building blocks of Forward Operating Bases to old night-vision goggles - is being sorted, bid for, scrapped, recycled, traded and cashed in.

At the US FOB Shank, home to 173rd Airborne, huge containers of every sort of supply are being assembled and assessed. Since arriving at Shank last year, the 173rd have counted the containers; on a base holding about 6200 soldiers, they were easily outnumbered by the giant boxes of kit. During the 2010 surge as the logistics system focused on pushing goods quickly out to far-flung bases, the giant boxes began to collect in yards and along roads on bases throughout the country. A small team called Forward Retrograde Elements is now helping ship that kit home.

Much of it is still usable, and is sent by road to Bagram. Here containers are processed at a radically increasing rate, currently averaging 278 per week, with shifts working 24-hours a day.

Each truckload costs around \$5, 000 to send, and trucks are sent at maximum load, with any items not considered deserving of their place disposed of locally. One morning a couple of

Afghan men brought a pickup to collect the dismantled wooden frame of some disused accommodation. Most of it will be recycled as precious fuel, and may save lives in Afghanistan's harsh winter. This long war has cost the coalition's taxpayers plenty, and the interest now for contributing countries is in salvaging what can be got. "Why are we retrograding? It's not just to get out of Afghanistan," says Major Adam Lackey, the 173rd Airborne Brigade executive officer who oversees much of the retrograde of Shank. "It's so that we can recoup some of the taxpayer dollars we've dumped into here."

Meanwhile, Uzbek officials have discreetly contacted American, German and British officials with an offer to use Uzbekistan's roads to extract vehicles and materiel, in exchange for leftover kit. Uzbekistan offers an alternative to Pakistan, which can shut exits in moments of diplomatic crises, and airfreight, which is vastly expensive.

The Uzbeks are said to be interested in armoured vehicles, mine detectors, helicopters, navigation equipment and night-vision goggles.

Uzbekistan is ranked as the sixth most corrupt country in the world by Transparency International. It is banned from most arms purchases in Europe and the United States. In December 2012, Uzbekistan left Russia's regional security bloc, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and increased its requests for Western arms.

## **Camp Followers**

Vietnam veteran Keith Blackley is the only Westerner in the Afghan Scouts. Started in 1931, co-opted by the Soviets as the Young Communist league, banned by the Taliban and now revived to a countrywide membership of around two thousand, the Scouts - 40% of whom are girls - are intended as a sustainable movement by the charity, PARSAs, which has breathed new life into the movement.

Blackley kickstarted the Scouts in postwar Iraq. He says that the Afghan Scouts do the same sort of activities as their counterparts in Cheltenham or Maryland or Lille. They have a similar uniform, with a headscarf for girls, worn under their caps, and work for badges. Because of security they do not currently camp out.

“The way to improve this country long term has to be through the children, and I believe Scouting is a tool that can help create leaders,” Blackey said...“The goal is to teach them to be leaders in a place where there really aren’t many, and to make them responsible for their own lives and their communities.”

## **GPS for capital**

The Ministry of Communications and Technology has announced a plan to enable GPS in Kabul.

First the city must be electronically mapped. Many street names are obscure or contentious. Once properly named and surveyed, the streets of the capital will become electronically navigable. An initial study suggests that a detailed survey will cost approx \$25m.

Other cities in Afghanistan are expected to follow.

## **Fashion Show for Feministas**

A fashion show was organized in Kabul by Young Women for Change, an independent, non-profit Afghan organization committed to empowering Afghan women and improving their lives. Most of the 10 models wearing 33 designs, from short-sleeved dresses to traditional outfits, were Afghan women who volunteer for the group.

The idea of women on display remains mostly taboo in Afghanistan. The blue burqa is still widely worn outside the house.

There have been a few other fashion shows in Afghanistan, but most were geared toward an international audience and seldom featured Afghan women or a mixed Afghan audience. At this

event, local Afghan media were not permitted to film the models, who appeared without headscarves and in short skirts.

"It may not be perfect and professional but it's a beginning," said Salma Gul, the 26-year-old tailor who made the clothes.

Organizers cited two reasons for staging the show: raising money, and changing attitudes toward women. A spokesman for the advocacy group, Mohammad Zafar Salehi, said they earned more than \$1,000.

### **Baby Boom Begun Abroad**

Private hospitals in Delhi are finding a new market in medical tourism from its neighbour, Afghanistan.

Delhi has a long term Afghan community of residents, refugees, students. Over the past five years this has been augmented by visitors seeking medical procedures at hospitals treating foreign patients. The Apollo Hospital has translators on staff, a website in Dari, and a separate payment desk for Afghans.

The Afghan Embassy in New Delhi estimates that up to 100 Afghans arrive in New Delhi each day during the winter high season for treatment. The most common treatments are for infertility issues or cancer.

"India is a good place for this, it's not as expensive as other countries and Pakistan's health care is not good," said a young Kabul businessman whose wife was treated here, and whose daughter was born in the city. "I was nervous about coming to Delhi but when I arrived I found many other Afghans in my neighbourhood, good food and weather."

IVF treatment here can costing as much as \$3,000. GDP per capita in Afghanistan is \$589. In

India, it's \$1,514.

Four airlines provide four or five flights daily between Afghanistan and Delhi. Most Afghans still travel to Pakistan for their health needs, but for those who can fund it, India, an hour's flight from Kabul, is becoming increasingly attractive. In Lajpat Nagar, a downmarket Delhi neighborhood popular with Afghan refugees, a room can be rented for 900 rupees, or around \$17, per day.

### **7th Most Dangerous Country for Journalists**

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CJP) has listed Afghanistan as seventh out of twelve countries reckoned to be the most hazardous for members of the press.

The Afghan media grew in size as in the last decade, but is now shrinking as international allies reduce aid. There are now around 400 media agencies operating in Afghanistan. Around 700 journalists lost their jobs in 2012.

CPJ warned that only media agencies that operate for political and religious leaders will survive.

According to the report Iraq is the most dangerous, Somalia second. Nepal ranks the 6th, Mexico 8th, Pakistan 10th, Brazil 11th and India 12th.

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