

Afghan News Roundup, 24 December 2012: Part One compiled by Elayne Jude, Great North News Service

Cruel Winter on the way

Life in winter in Afghan's internal refugee camps is a struggle to survive. Last winter, at least 42 people died of exposure or starvation in makeshift camps on Kabul's perimeters, according to the Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations. The French aid group Solidarites International estimates more than 100 children died.

This winter, 48 percent of \$448 million that has been requested to help 8.8 million Afghans had been pledged by the end of November, according to the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. In total, the Un says, 2 million Afghans are at risk. Camps dwellers are particularly vulnerable.

Afghanistan is home to 460,000 internally displaced people, in 55 camps across the country. More than 30,000 live in illegal camps around Kabul, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, living in extreme poverty in makeshift housing with little access to sanitation or medical care. Aid from the Afghan refugee ministry is minimal, and assistance from international aid groups is inadequate. Last winter, emergency relief efforts did not get properly underway until February.

The Afghan government does not approve the refugee shanties, claiming that many are economic, not conflict, migrants. The Ministry of Refugees submitted a budget for aid for internally displaced people, but reportedly the Finance Ministry didn't approve it. Residents do not qualify for most humanitarian assistance, education or medical care.

UNHCR has committed \$2.8 million this year to assist internally displaced people year-round.

In place of unaffordable firewood, the refugees burn trash and plastic, and dried manure. The stench is awful, and well-off neighbors complain.

Aschiana, a nongovernmental Afghan relief group, provided one camp with a well and two tiny schools — one for boys and one for girls — housed in tents, in complying with government bans on permanent structures. The teachers are themselves refugees. There are occasional deliveries of cooking oil, rice, flour and blankets by relief groups, insufficient for the camp's 5,000 to 6,000 people.

Some wealthy Afghan businessmen also delivered food, fuel and blankets.

This year, volunteers like Parween Omidi, a media worker in Kabul for ISAF, have provided aid. Omidi, an Afghan American from Orange County, collected clothes, blankets, gloves, hats and

school supplies for families at a displaced-persons camp called Chaman-e-Hozori. Escorted by a U.S. military security team, Omidi handed out supplies to several dozen camp residents.

One resident says displaced people don't care who rules the country, or whether international troops go or stay. He has heard American combat troops are leaving in 2014. "What does it matter?" he says. "After they leave, we will still be poor, and we will still be right here."

Businesswoman Breaks Boundaries

Roya Mahboob is a 25-year-old tech entrepreneur and CEO of Afghan Citadel Services, an IT firm she founded in the traditionally liberal city of Herat. Her staff of 20 software programmers -- more than half of them women -- develops computer software for government ministries, universities, and international organizations in Afghanistan.

Her success is controversial. She receives threatening calls and messages almost daily. Her father is often confronted by locals who tell him it is dishonorable for his daughter to be working in public, meeting male clients, driving a car. Under similar pressures, two of her female employees have resigned.

Mahboob says potential Afghan clients, many of them men, struggle to deal with a female CEO. Some boycott her company, or expect her products to be cheaper than that offered by male-run rivals.

Afghan Citadel Services currently has ongoing or finished projects worth approximately \$500,000. They have delivered a patient-management system for Afghan hospitals and a student-registration system for universities and private schools. They have opened new offices and hired more staff as the company expands. In partnership with Film Annex, Citadel launched the Afghan Development Project, broadcasting current events, interviews, and news clips, and equipping Afghan schools with Internet access.

Mahboob's main goal is to become a role model for Afghan women.

"We have to understand that we have rights. We can bring a lot of changes to society and can bring peace and prosperity to the economy of Afghanistan."

Luring investors with Pre-Withdrawal Tax Breaks

A proposal endorsed by President Karzai would grant a 10-year tax break and provide free land to companies investing in Afghanistan over the next two years,

Diminishing aid and the spectre of civil war have dampened economic activity. The Coalition estimates that several billion dollars in cash were smuggled to Dubai from Afghanistan in 2012. Many investors wait to see whether a Taliban takeover succeeds the withdrawal of Coalition forces in 2014. The details of an enduring U.S. military presence here after 2014 are also to be settled.

The incentives plan would seek to unlock the freeze on economic activity by rewarding investment now, and up to the withdrawal. It would require approval by the full cabinet and the government.

The package would stimulate exports, agricultural enterprises and construction. The proposal calls for simplifying the process of issuing building permits, requiring municipalities to issue them within 21 days.

Real estate market is suffering. As foreign contractors and aid workers go home, rents and house prices for the choicer properties fall.

It should be noted that a large percentage of the money spent on military contracts—perhaps as much as 80% or 90%—currently reach Afghan pockets, going instead to large overseas companies from those countries whose aid budget the money originates from. The presence of monied foreigners has however undoubtedly stimulated providers of goods and services to cater to their needs.

This month the U.S. Department of Commerce and U.S. Agency for International Development brought several U.S. companies to Kabul, to promote franchising opportunities for Afghan businesses. The companies—electronics retailer, an industrial and construction equipment supplier, educational tutoring and printing services firm—met Afghan businesspeople looking for new investment opportunities.

Gold Rush to Dubai

Crude ingots are appearing in increasing numbers in the hand luggage of commercial passengers leaving the country, often for Dubai. It is thought, by Afghan and Dubai customs, that money laundering in Afghanistan has taken a new, glittering, golden form.

It's legal. The gold is declared. Some of it may be part of a genuine gold trade. It's the sudden and extreme hike in quantities that points to a new form of exchange. A central mystery is: Where does it come from ? For very little is mined incountry.

The smuggling of currencies from Kabul to Dubai is long established. The vast majority of monetary transactions in Afghanistan takes place outside of the formal banking structure. At this point it's impossible to know whether the traditional haven in which affluent Afghans salt away their assets is seeing a preparation for potential civil war and economic collapse in 2014, or whether the gold rush represents a new ingenuity on behalf of Afghan's racketeers.

Snow Leopard: Ghost Star of the Himalayas

The snow leopard is one of the shyest, rarest, most fabled and elusive animals in the world. Experienced trackers may spend years in pursuit of a glimpse of a frosted coat, a glacial eye, a thick stripey tail passing like fog through the Himalayan drifts. Its numbers are unknown, but estimates of the population are as low as 2000 in the wild. Of these, Afghanistan holds perhaps one or two hundred.

Now The Wildlife Conservation Society and USAID have tasked Boone Smith, an Idaho fourth-generation big-cat trapper, to capture and collar a snow leopard in Afghanistan in just 20 days. The goal is to collect data on the cat population and to educate remote mountain farmers on how to co-exist with these creatures, who are sometimes killed to protect livestock.

In the Wakhan Corridor, a mountainous border region in Northeastern Afghanistan Smith made his film "Snow Leopard of Afghanistan," featured as part of Big Cat Week on Nat Geo WILD in mid December.

After trapping and tranquilising a cat, the team has only an hour to examine the animal and attach a satellite collar, which will collect valuable data before falling off after 13 months.

You can follow the story here:

<http://video.nationalgeographic.co.uk/video/news/animals-news/afghanistan-snow-leopards-vin/>

<http://wvxu.org/post/snow-leopard-afghanistan-filmmaker-tony-gerber>

With thanks to the Los Angeles Times, Radio Free Europe, Wall Street Journal, ABC News, The New York Times