By Nigel Green, Research Associate, U K Defence Forum

American government investigators working in Afghanistan have revealed "major weaknesses" in development programmes which have received around $32 billion.

Retired US Marine Corps Major General Arnold Fields was brought in to look at delays caused by security fears, corruption and even goods held up by customs' departments in neighbouring countries.

More than $5.6 billion – or 17 per cent - of aid given by the American government since 2001 has not been used because of the problems. Major General Fields was appointed as Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) last year and has been given a staff of 30 to find ways of getting the aid through to ordinary Afghans.

The SIGAR report also reveals that a special hotline set up by the Department of Defense to report suspected cases of fraud and waste has received 228,000 calls and letters and has saved around $425 million. In his report, Major General Fields said: "Having conducted two extended visits to Afghanistan, I can state with confidence that there is much work for SIGAR to perform in order to provide the depth and breadth of oversight the Congress has mandated.

"The reconstruction effort is taking place in a complex, challenging, dangerous and inhospitable environment. Participants at all levels brave the difficulties in a gallant effort and should be commended for their many sacrifices. However, their sacrifices will not bring about success if there is no clear and unified strategy on which to focus and to which all partners in the reconstruction effort are unequivocally committed."

"Based on my recent trips to Afghanistan, I fear there are major weaknesses in strategy. Although SIGAR has not completed an in-depth review of reconstruction strategies, there is a broad consensus among those with whom I have spoken that reconstruction efforts are fragmented and that existing strategies lack coherence."

The report has been read with interest by US politicians. Rep. Ike Skelton, the House of Representatives' Armed Services Committee Chairman, said: "I'm encouraged by the progress made by the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) in building a strong capacity for oversight since its first quarterly report.

"Efforts to eliminate waste, fraud, and abuse in Afghanistan reconstruction programs are vital to helping Afghans build security and stability within the country's borders and throughout the region. At the same time, I'm troubled by many of the report's findings. The report describes fragmented reconstruction efforts and incoherent strategies with 'major weaknesses'".

The SIGAR report also tells how the number of US troops serving in Afghanistan may soon double to 60,000. There are also reports that the UK government may be asked to increase the 8,000 British soldiers currently in Afghanistan. It is hoped a troop surge may help cut the numbers of attacks on coalition forces.

The SIGAR report highlights "deteriorating security" as one of the key reasons for delays in projects such as road construction and the building of schools and clinics.

SIGAR teams have visited a wide range of development and anti-narcotics operations including those being carried out in Gardez, Khost, Kajaki Dam, Lashkar Ghar, Mazar-e-Sharif and Tarin Kowt.

The report describes how agencies have consistently reported that spending has been delayed by the following issues:

•Almost none of the equipment and materials needed being available locally.

•De-mining of key locations.

•Increased security incidents.

•Imported equipment and materials held by neighbouring countries' customs' authorities.

•The onset of bad weather.

•Afghan National Army commanders demanding contractor perform work outside the scope of the original contract.

Meanwhile, SIGAR aims to:

•Improve management and accountability over funds made available to U.S. and Afghan agencies and contractors.

•Prevent fraud, waste and abuse by identifying weak and investigating potential corruption.

•Improve the effectiveness of the overall reconstruction strategy and its component programs.

•Provide accurate and balanced information, observations, and recommendations

•Advance U.S. interests in reconstructing Afghanistan.

Major General Fields and his colleagues are liaising with a range of Afghan government departments, as well as British and other coalition forces' representatives, across the country.

The SIGAR team has received $16 million to finance its objectives. But Major General Fields warned: "While the $16 million will allow SIGAR to hire approximately 37 full-time employees

and fund support services, space and logistical requirements, it falls short of the $23 million originally requested in order to effectively implement the office's mandated oversight activities. The $16 million provided limits the detailed assessments, evaluations, and analysis necessary to effectively oversee the $32 billion in humanitarian and reconstruction aid provided by the U.S."

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