

Written by Simon Roberts

Soldiers at Camp Phoenix, located near Kabul, are facing hard times. With the shelves at the base store looking a little bare; there's no Irish Spring Body Wash, no Doritos and no Aspirin. While actual items themselves may seem a little trivial, the missing supplies underscore a more serious problem, which senior military officials have been saying for months: U.S. and coalition troops must find new routes to supply what will be a rapidly growing force in Afghanistan, ones that avoid the treacherous border areas of Pakistan where convoys have been ambushed.

Supplying an army in any war is crucial; it's not just bullets and bombs, but everything from fuel to lettuce that must be shipped in by the ton and the truckload. And in a country like Afghanistan which is landlocked, mountainous and with few good roads supplying an army poses enormously difficult challenges even without attacks by militants.

Recent announcements made last month that the military had reached transit deals with Russia and several Central Asian states to the north of Afghanistan, to provide an alternate route from Pakistan should help the situation, but it's not yet clear whether any new route would be able to absorb the heavy traffic.

However a route through Russia and neighbouring countries is not necessarily a long-term solution either. The over-land route is much longer and more expensive, and dealing with repressive regimes in Central Asia also could pose political dilemmas.

Sensitive military goods, such as weapons and ammunition, are transported by military convoy or air, and have not been hurt by supply-route problems, but air transport for non-combat goods is prohibitively expensive and also logistically difficult.

Currently subcontractors transport about 75 percent of non-sensitive military goods for U.S. troops from the port in Karachi, through the Torkham border crossing into Afghanistan. About 125 shipping containers pass through that crossing daily. It's the shortest route to Kabul and Bagram Air Base yet it goes through narrow roads, mountain passes and hostile areas. Despite the risk, security is often lax and in recent months, Taliban-led militants have frequently attacked the military shipping containers. Militants have destroyed more than 300 shipping containers so far, torching at least 80 Humvees for the Afghan National Army.

Due to the escalating number of attacks, Pakistan has suspended traffic through the crossing three times in the past several weeks alone in order to launch offensives against the militants. At the other major crossing in Pakistan, through Chaman in Baluchistan province, tribesmen blockaded the road for five days recently because a tribesman was killed, resulting in the stranding of hundreds of trucks and fuel tankers.

However, Taliban-led militants are not the only ones to blame though. Some drivers are known to steal fuel and supplies from the trucks, or fake militant attacks and sell the goods on themselves.