

As the campaign for the Afghan presidency gets under way (see footnote on page 2), Afghan News Round Up (compiled by Elayne Jude for Great North News Service) looks more widely at human repair, roads unravelling, prizes for celluloid and carpet, WTO membership and different degrees of starvation

A China-aid Jumhoriate hospital has been inaugurated in the Afghan capital, kabul, in a ceremony attended by Second Vice President Mohammad Karim Khalili, underscoring China's persistent and wide ranging interest in the country.

"The China-aid Jumhoriate Hospital is one of the most technology-advanced medical institutions in Afghanistan, and was handed over to the Afghan side in 2009. The Chinese side respected the Afghan government's initial plan for the hospital's business operation and appreciated its great effort to seek international cooperation in the past five years," said China's Ambassador to Afghanistan, Deng Xijun. The 154-bed hospital boasts Afghanistan's only kidney dialysis machines. The Chinese government will provide further training programmes in institution management and medical personnel training.

"China will firmly support Afghanistan's independence and integrity. We wish a peaceful transition in Afghanistan in the year of 2014 following presidential election and NATO withdrawal," Deng said.

Weaving Afghan carpets in Pakistan

The Afghan Chambers of Commerce and Industries has announced that almost all Afghan carpet weavers are now working in Pakistan. Their work is sold internationally as of Pakistani origin.

The Chamber called on the government to support a significant and growing industry. and provide domestic opportunities for those Afghans currently working across the border.

For the second year running, Afghanistan won the award for best carpets in the world at the Demotics International Exhibition, among 160 companies from 60 countries.

"This is a great achievement for Afghanistan," said Muhammad Daud Jabarkhail, Chairman of Tanveer Company.

Best film at Dhaka

The Afghan film "Afghan Women Behind Driving Wheel" won best documentary film at the 13th Dhaka International Film Festival, in Bangladesh.

Directed and produced by female Afghan filmmaker Sahra Karimi, the film explores depicts the lives of Afghan women desperate to drive in a country where female drivers are banned.

The documentary has received almost 20 awards.

Sahra Karimi is a graduate of the Film and Television Faculty of Slovakia in 2012. She began her career in Afghanistan by opening the Kapila multimedia company. Her next film "Pianist in Kabul" is in production.

Afghanistan to Join the WTO

Officials at the Ministry of Commerce and Industries (MoCI) announced that preparations for Afghanistan will join the World Trade Organisation in the next three months.

After signing a trade agreement with the U.S., Afghanistan needs only to sign trade deals with the European Union and two other countries before it can be admitted into the WTO. Officials say that U.S. support is most critical to gaining membership.

"This is a very good day, we are very pleased that we have come to an agreement and we look forward to the day when Afghanistan can sit at the table in Geneva as a full member..." said Mara Burr, the Deputy Assistant United States Trade Representative for South and Central Asian Affairs."

As a member of the WTO, trade and investment with Afghanistan is expected to increase. Some analysts suggest that the benefits of membership in the WTO will depend on the economic management of the government and the improvement of Afghan products.

Afghan children suffering irreversible harm

More than half of Afghan children suffer irreversible physical and mental damage due to poor nourishment in the first two years of life. A decade after the fall of the Taliban government, 55% of the country's children are stunted because of inadequate food, Afghan government and UN data shows.

"After the age of two years, stunting is largely irreversible, and has an impact on growth and development and cognitive function," says Carrie Morrison from the World Food Programme. "...Women who marry young and are stunted themselves give birth to a small infant and the cycle goes on."

In a district of around 13,000 people, maternal malnutrition is so widespread that a programme set up for around 100 pregnant and breastfeeding mothers is now serving 400.

Tens of thousands of babies and toddlers have experienced acute malnutrition. They have the protruding bones and distended stomachs typical of famine victims. Acute malnutrition is widespread, but can usually be alleviated relatively quickly with high energy feeding paste. Chronic malnutrition may be harder to treat as symptoms may not be so obvious.

Morrison says anaemia, which affects three-quarters of Afghan children, disrupts brain

development in young children, with effects including "stunting, sickliness, poor school attendance, and lower levels of concentration and memory". A lack of iodine is the world's leading cause of preventable mental impairment, and a lack of vitamin A hobbles the immune system, pushing up death rates among children under five. Lacing basic foods such as salt and flour with micronutrients has been rated one of the most economical ways to do good. A recent UN study found that even a minimally healthy diet was beyond the reach of the majority of Afghans; in some provinces, only one in five could afford regular balanced meals.

Basic knowledge of nutrition is lacking.

"We do worry about chronic malnutrition, but all we can give them is advice," says a nutrition nurse at an Oxfam-backed project near the city of Balkh.

"Parents don't know much about health here", says one doctor. "If a child comes in after too long with chronic malnutrition, he cannot fully recover. We can only teach the parents so they take more care it doesn't happen with their other kids."

"Wherever the road ends, that's where the Taliban starts"
- U.S. commander Lt. Gen. Karl Eikenberry, 2006.

The road network built by the Coalition's \$4 billion is falling apart.

Western officials say the Afghan government is unable to maintain even a fraction of the roads and highways constructed since 2001, when the country had less than 50 miles of paved roads.

"There's been nothing. No maintenance," said a U.S. official, speaking anonymously.

Since 2012, the US has declined to fund the Afghan government's road maintenance projects because it is so poorly executed.

The Afghans say they are doing some maintenance but that the withdrawal of funds has made proper work impossible.

Mohammad Aref Raiskhel, the director of maintenance at Afghanistan's Ministry of Public Works, said, "I beg them to help us once again."

The U.S.-built highways were welcomed post 2001, but exorbitant costs and contractors' shortcomings became infamous. The Taliban were often bribed in exchange for a cease-fire during construction.

Some roads and highways have been worn away by overuse, others destroyed by IEDs. On Highway One, connecting Kabul and Kandahar, fatal car crashes have soared. Military operations and urgent casualty evacuations suffer delay.

During the early years of, the urgent need to build pushed the question of maintenance out of mind. The U.S. Army used to dispatch a platoon to repair and reopen roads. Drawdown has removed those resources.

The insurgency poses an enormous security challenge. More than 200 roadworkers were killed over the last decade. In 2013 the World Bank sent surveyors to assess a potential road construction and maintenance project in Nurestan province. The survey was quickly abandoned after the surveyors were targeted by the Taliban.

U.S. officials blame the Public Works Ministry. The ministry is reportedly unable to procure contracts or implement its own projects. Each year, half of its budget allegedly goes unspent because of mismanagement.

The U.S. continues to build new roads in Afghanistan, multimillion-dollar projects whose funds were allocated years ago.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/a-dangerous-drive-on-afghanistans-highway-

one/2014/01/30/8d802f0e-89f0-11e3-a5bd-844629433ba3_gallery.html#photo=1

Afghan Presidential campaign kicks off - 11 candidates at the moment, all male, 10 are Pashtun. The most likely outcome at the moment seems to be a run-off between Abdullah Abdullah, who won 30% in the fraudulent 2009 election, and A N Other. the main candidates are

Abdullah Abdullah - ethnic Tajik with some Pashtun. Former Foreign Minister

Ashraf Ghani - former Finance Minister and academic. warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum his running mate

Qayum Karzai - Pres Karzai's elder brother. American restaurateur

Zamal Rassoul - former Foreign Minister, thought of as Karzai loyalist. Female running mate

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