Afghan News Roundup for December 2013 , compiled by Elayne Jude for Great North News Service, includes HIV positives up, from Russia with lubrication, CASA ball rolling, Finmeccanica grounded

Growing Violence Against Aid Workers

Mark Bowden, U.N. humanitarian coordinator in Afghanistan, is "extremely concerned" about rising violence towards aid workers there. In statement, Bowden says the violence is taking place while Afghanistan is in a "difficult transition" during which time the need for humanitarian aid might well increase.

"We are looking at the situation with concern about what are clearly increasing numbers of aid workers affected by the conflict," said Mark Bowden, the humanitarian coordinator for the United Nations here.

In the previous twelve months, there were 237 attacks, 36 killed, 46 wounded and 96 detained or abducted. Last year, there were 175 attacks, with 11 people killed, 26 wounded and 44 detained or abducted.

Bowden: "The nature of the fighting has changed. You have more disseminated ground-level fighting than you've had before, and this has come as a result of a change of tactics by handing over the fighting to the Afghan national security forces. So civilian casualties have increased dramatically this year, so obviously you're seeing more widespread displacement of people as well."

Aid officials have been reluctant directly to blame insurgent groups for the increase, claiming that many cases seemed to stem from criminal activity. Acbar, a group that represents many leading NGOs, used different definitions for aid workers, to record 32 fatalities this year.

For the past five years, the number of foreign aid workers in Afghanistan has declined as

security deteriorated. In October, a report from the Aid Worker Security Database identified Afghanistan as the most dangerous country for these workers.The data is compiled by Humanitarian Outcomes, a consultancy to aid groups and donor governments.

Officially, the Taliban say there has been no change in their policy of avoiding attacks on aid workers.

Some aid workers say they are feeling a growing threat not only from insurgents and criminals, but sometimes from Afghan government forces and, on occasion, from the Coalition.

ISAF released a statement on the issue. "In accordance with international law, ISAF recognizes health or medical facilities as protected structures. ISAF forces do not intentionally use medical facilities as firebases or lodging, or for any other military use...Insurgent forces, on the other hand, have used protected structures contrary to international law and conducted operations from them."

HIV Rate Up

The Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) announced that cases of HIV virus in Afghanistan are up by 38 percent from last year. Najia Tareq, the Deputy Minister of Public Health, said new and more robust efforts were being taken in Afghanistan every year to address the issue.

The United Nations estimates that around 5,000 people are HIV positive in Afghanistan. Only 30 percent of those have been tested. More than 300,000 Afghans have been tested for HIV/AIDS this year. UNICEF has said it will continue its efforts to curtail the spread of HIV in Afghanistan, especially amongst mothers, through 2015.

"Reducing the transmission of HIV from mothers to children through 2015 is a real target and we believe that we will reach this target," UNICEF Health and Nutrition head in Afghanistan Dr. Nasreen Khan said. "In developed countries, the transmission of HIV from mother to children is entirely prevented by giving voluntary counselling, access to anti-virus medicines, safe child birth and breastfeeding."

"The Ministry of Haj and Islamic Affairs is committed to making the people more aware of HIV through the Mosques, Takya Khana and other religious places," Advisor to the Ministry of Haj and Islamic Affairs Mohammad Sharif Robati said.

500,000 Tons of Russian Oil

The Afghan Ministry of Commerce & Industries (MoCI) announced an agreement to purchase 500,000 tons of oil from a Russian government company, at a discounted price.

Gasprom has reportedly agreed a 95 USD discount on each ton of oil, and a 55 USD discount on each ton of diesel fuel.

Mutsel Komki, the Deputy Minister of Commerce and Industries said: "We will import the oil on easy terms and conditions, which means that the government will be informed about the price and expenses of its imports and we will set the prices with cooperation of private companies in order to control market prices so that there is no financial loss for the customers and the importers."

20 percent of the oil is to be imported by the Oil & Gas Enterprise, and the rest by private companies.

CASA 1000

Breshna, Afghanistan's national utility, announced that preliminary work on the Central Asia-South Asia electricity trade and transmission project (CASA-1000) is progressing smoothly , and that the project will soon be up for bidding amongst international companies. .

CASA-1000 will transfer electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, towards Pakistan, overland

through Afghanistan. Contracts have been signed, establishing financial and logistic committees for preparing documents and bidding for establishment of the project, technical assessments. The transfer route from Kyrgyzstan to Pakistan and locations for sub stations in Afghanistan and Pakistan have been agreed.

Breshna officials say transit duty and price of electricity would be negotiated in meetings to be held imminently.

"Our estimate shows that Afghanistan will receive $ 26 million annually as transit duty and we will also discuss the price of 100 megawatt electricity which we will purchase from this project," said Mirwais Alimi, chairman of Breshna Commercial Company.

The CASA 1000 project was initiated in 2006. 1,300 megawatts of electricity will be transferred from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan via Afghanistan and onward to Pakistan, accruing transit duties of around 26m USD per annum. Afghanistan will also purchase 300 megawatts electricity from the project.

The project will cost nearly $ 800 million. The World Bank has pledged to pay Afghanistan's share

$486m moulder on the tarmac

Sixteen transport planes that cost U.S. taxpayers at least $486 million are waiting in Kabulto be destroyed without ever being delivered to the Afghan Air Force. There are four more in Germany, also scheduled for dismantling.

The special inspector general for Afghanistan is investigating why the refurbished G222 turboprop aircraft from Finmeccanica SpA's (FNC) Alenia Aermacchi North America unit no longer can be flown after logging only 200 of 4,500 hours of U.S.-led training flights and missions..

The unused transport planes symbolise doubts about the Afghan Air Force's capability to operate independently after withdrawal.

"We need answers to this huge waste of U.S. taxpayer money," said John Sopko, the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction. "Who made the decision to purchase these planes, and why? We need to get to the bottom of this, and that's why we're opening this inquiry."

The G222 transports, refurbished by Finmeccanica, were intended to fly top Afghan civilian officials and combat troops, and conduct medical evacuations. Six have been cannibalised for spare parts, according to a separate audit by the Pentagon inspector general.

Sopko's investigation will review the decision to select the aircraft, determine the total spent to buy, sustain, and dispose of them and evaluate what procedures are in place to prevent similar failures with other purchases for the Afghan Air Force.

Navy Commander Elissa Smith, a Pentagon spokeswoman, told Bloomberg that the G222 aircraft's failings have "had no impact on the readiness of the Afghan Air Force" because it has been operating 26 Cessna Aircraft Co. 208 Caravan planes "exceedingly well during the last several years and has been able to compensate."

The G222s eventually are to be replaced by C-130H transports from Lockheed Martin Corp. The C-130H "will provide better range, as well as passenger and cargo movement" than the G222, Smith said.

with thanks to: Voice of America, New York Times, ToloNews

Postscript

Propaganda fails in Afghanistan, report says. From USA TODAY By Tom Vanden Brook December 4, 2013

A British expert says U.S. commanders are routinely conned by propaganda contractors.

WASHINGTON - U.S. propaganda efforts in Afghanistan have failed because of poorly designed programs by contractors who often propose expensive marketing solutions to U.S. commanders incapable of making informed choices, according to a study published by the Army's War College.

Examples of failed efforts, according to the paper, include a proposal to pay $6,000 dowries to Afghan men to keep them off the battlefield — a scheme that could have cost $4 billion. That project, ultimately rejected, fits into what the U.S. military calls Information Operations programs.

The dowry program and ineffective television ad campaigns "represent merely the tip of the iceberg: over the years, huge amounts of money have been spent on IO programs that are largely anchored in advertising and marketing style communication with little concurrent investment, it would appear, in detailed understanding of audiences and environments," the report concludes.

USA TODAY, in a series of reports since 2012, has found the Pentagon has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on poorly tracked propaganda programs. A government report obtained by the newspaper this spring showed the impact of the programs is unclear, and the military doesn't know whether it is targeting the right foreign audiences. These propaganda efforts include websites, leaflets and broadcasts intended to change foreigners' "attitudes and behaviors in support of U.S. Government" objectives, according to the report by the Government Accountability Office.

The author of the War College study, Steve Tatham, is the longest continuously serving officer

in the British military's information activities. Tatham says contractors' attempt to influence attitudes "may work in convincing U.S. citizens to buy consumer products; it does not easily translate to the conflict- and crisis-riven societies to which it has been applied." It makes more sense, he says, to attempt to change problem behavior, for instance understanding why Afghan soldiers desert and addressing their concerns.

The military had no immediate comment on the report.

The dowry program dates to 2011 when a contractor persuaded a general inexperienced in IO campaigns that it "would take huge swaths of fighters off the battlefield by facilitating their marriages to eligible young Afghan women."

Tatham evaluated the plan for commanders and found it would "quickly exceed" $4 billion per year. He found a number of other problems, including the false assumption that many fighters were unmarried and the effect on Afghan men who didn't receive the payment.

"There is no empirical research to suggest that this is a sensible solution to deterring young men of fighting age from joining the insurgency," Tatham wrote. "Even if there were, it would be cost prohibitive and open to such widespread and pernicious abuse as to render it unworkable."

The program was canceled because of cost, he wrote.

Tatham notes that USA TODAY has been a "long-standing critic" of IO efforts. Because of the "persistently critical coverage," its reporting is often dismissed by the Pentagon's IO community. However, Tatham says, some officially sponsored studies echo at least some of the criticism.

He points to a 2012 study by Rand, a Pentagon-affiliated think-tank, and what he called its most important conclusion:

"if the overall Information Operation mission in Afghanistan is defined as convincing most

residents of contested areas to side decisively with the Afghan government and its foreign allies against the Taliban insurgency, this has not been achieved."