Afghan News Round Up: December 5, 2012 Compiled by Elayne Jude for Great North News Service

Petraeus fallout, Kite Runner onstage, four-legged bomb disposal and Russia on the rise

How the Military are Fallen: Petraeus looks sheepish

Re Petraeus' affair with Paula Broadwell, a married woman, a former Taliban Cabinet minister turned insurgency leader commented: "The American general's sex disgrace is a slap not only to the character of the U.S. but also to the faces of Karzai and all others who are pro-Western. The bloodshed addict General Petraeus was not only after the blood of unfortunate Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan. He was also taking the chastity of married women."

Mullah Juma Khan Akhund, a Taliban commander in Helmand and Kandahar provinces: "Committing such an immoral crime has a traditional punishment, and it disrespects our people and our land. We used to tell everyone that these invaders are here not to help Afghans but to disrespect and kill them. General Petraeus's affair gives living proof of that.

"General, my son" – to address someone as "my son" in Kandahar is to challenge him to a fight – "you can't win this war. And now, even before your final defeat, you're hiding your face in shame because of your immoral sexual relationship... Petraeus and his married mistress should be handed over to the Afghans to be stoned."

"The U.S. ought to keep its drones focused on its own generals, and not on al Qaeda and the Taliban," says a young student at Kabul University. Mustafa Ahmadzai, another student: "Sex is part of American political and military life. But in a country like Afghanistan? No way. Before leaving for Afghanistan, I'm sure U.S. forces are strongly advised to leave their sexual organs behind in the U.S.A."

Zair Gul Zadran, a Haqqani Network commander in Khost province, says: "Our understanding was that sex is a common matter in American society. But if he committed the offense in our country, there is a traditional penalty: he should sacrifice dozens of sheep in contrition for his impropriety."

UK stages The Kite Runner

The exiled Afghan author of the international bestseller announces the first UK stage adaptation of his six year old novel, The Kite Runner. "There are still myths about Afghanistan in the west, such as that the country is stuck in the 12th century. There is an element of romanticism too, as well as the idea that Afghans hate the west," said author Khaled Hosseini, who has just finished his third novel.

"[Afghans] don't like having troops on their soil, but they have done the calculation and decided there is good reason for it. They don't see it as an occupation."

The Nottingham Playhouse and Liverpool Everyman theatres had secured the rights to stage the European premiere of Matthew Spangler's play, first produced by the San Jose Repertory in 2009.

Hosseini now works as a goodwill envoy for the United Nations high commissioner for refugees (UNHCR). He doesn't object to the war being used in popular entertainment "as long as it is done in a responsible way...People do have to be told a story. And people who pick up my books want to be told a story too."

Hosseini remains optimistic about the future of Afghanistan despite the increased physical danger in some areas of the country. "If I compare it to 10 years ago, when I first went back, it is worlds better in terms of things like the number of children in school and child mortality and the average lifespan and the technology that is available. On the other hand, there is a lack of security in parts of the north. Places I can't go with the UNHCR any more."

Education was the most important priority: "Secondary education too. The country is going to need technocrats and engineers."

Dogs to the rescue

An unusual 18-month training programme, conducted in a seeming frenzy of barking, snuffling and wagging, is transforming a bunch of raw recruits into highly skilled mine detectors.

At the Mine Detection and Dogs Centre (MDC) a few kilometres from Kabul, 200 dogs, mostly German shepherds and Belgian malinois, take their first steps on the road to qualifying in one of Afghanistan's most important professions.

"Using dogs in Afghanistan is a very efficient way to detect mines," says MDC's training manager, Abdul Jabar Baser. "Dogs can find mines faster than humans. Dogs can also find explosives around 13 centimetres (five inches) deep in soil. They can find plastic land mines that cannot be discovered by metal detectors."

Bombs are created out of unused artillery shells, explosives in containers such as pressure cookers, and the common fertilizer, ammonium nitrate.

According to a recent UN report, in the first six months of 2012, 1,145 Afghan civilians were killed and around 2,000 were wounded, mostly by roadside bombs.
There are more than a dozen organisations and contractors and around 13,000 deminers working to eliminate forgotten mines in Afghanistan.

Dog teams can clear an area six times faster than humans. The dogs are trained to walk and search for explosives in straight lines. When the dog finds the explosives, it sits, looks at its handler and waits until given the command to return. The dog then gets a ball as a reward, and

plays while the deminer team deals with the mine.

Deminer dogs can work an average of eight years before they retire. The dog handlers and demining teams are all Afghans.

Russian Rebound

The old Russian cultural centre in Kabul is no more. A brand new building is going up on the site, symbolising a reborn Russian relationship with its old satrap turned foe. "To have good, friendly, neighbourly relations you must have some cultural component to it," Russia's envoy to Kabul, Andrey Avetisyan, told Reuters.

Russia, who lost 15 000 in a war which has been deliberately forgotten in the homeland, is ever mindful of its restless southern borders, the numbers of Muslim emigrés in its northern cities, and the heroin traffic from the south.

Russia has a history of supporting culture in Kabul. The new centre will offer Russian language, singing, dancing and handicrafts, and a concert hall.

The old building became notorious as home to scores of heroin addicts. Russian state company Spetstroi Rossii will oversee the project, which has been contracted by the Russian government. It will employ Afghan construction firms.

"Demand for the Russian language is growing. It is more widely spoken in Afghanistan than five years ago," Avetisyan said. "Foreign advisers and experts are not going to be here forever. NATO, the European Union, they will all go".

At Kabul University around 220 students are currently studying for four year degrees in Russian, almost double that of five years ago.

Golden Harvest

Nangarhar farmers who switched from opium cultivation to saffron in a pilot programme have almost tripled their income, according to the Ministry of Agriculture.

The famers expect to make US$1,200 from an acre of saffron, compared to about US$400 per acre of opium.

The Ministry of Agriculture's scheme runs in 14 districts of Nagarhar province. It supplies farmers with up to 400 kilograms of saffron plant each. It claims an acre of land can yield up to 800 kilograms of the valuable plant. It also provides expertise, tools, fertiliser, insecticides and fungicides. A kilo of saffron can fetch $8,000.
Saffron can be cultivated and harvested once a year and only needs to be watered four times before being harvested.

Saffron cultivation was established six years ago in western Herat province. Now it's grown in

20 out of 34 Afghan provinces.

PPI in Kabul

A private company has won the contract worth $1bn to construct the second stage of government residential blocks in Kabul. The Khwaja Rawash Project includes 175 blocks and over 14,000 apartments.

The Ministry of Urban Development Affairs and Housing announced the deal, one of the first public-private Afghan partnerships in the housing sector, 28 November:
"The ministry policy in housing is to support the private sector. The private sector is to build the houses and give to the people at a low price according to their incomes."

The complex is to be built in the Kasaba area, and will be accessible to people with disabilities. It is scheduled for completion in four years' time.

Executive Head of Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries Mohammad Qurban Haqju commented: "It is great that a big project is going to be built according to modern housing in the 21st century like housing in the US and Europe".

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