

by Chris Graham

ENSOR RETURNS TO UK

After helping to modernise Afghanistan's media, David Ensor is to direct the Voice of America in the UK, moving back to London after two years in Afghanistan. It was in 2006 that Ensor quit his job as CNN national security correspondent and moved from Washington DC to an apartment off Kensington High Street with his wife Anita, a former news producer, and their nine-year-old son Andrew. He said: "Life is short. I'd spent 32 years covering the news and loved every minute of it. But journalism is the sidelines, just the first draft of history. I wanted to participate."

Three-and-a-half years after taking a private sector job as head of public relations at Mercuria, an energy company, Ensor was appointed to a new senior US government post in Afghanistan: director of communications and public diplomacy for the US embassy. The job of communications "tsar" included a hefty budget to build up Afghan television, telephone and radio infrastructure and programming. "[The late diplomat] Richard Holbrooke asked me to go. I wanted to do my part to make sure Afghanistan moved into the modern world and never became a base for terrorist camps again," says Ensor, 60, tanned from his time in Kabul.

Ensor's move to London was driven by an urge to return to childhood stomping grounds. "Our daughter Kaya was already at school in England. We moved to London because I'd lived in Kensington and Hampstead on and off growing up and wanted to come back as an expat. I had fond memories of being taken to the statue of Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens". (Financial Times)

AFGHANS WATCH TV SOAPS

Afghanis find their entertainment from television serials and soap operas rather than going to the cinema. In rural areas, particularly in those areas Taliban are active, all entertainment, even listening to music, is forbidden. A few cinemas are still open in Kabul and other big cities, displaying mostly Bollywood and Hollywood movies, but many people are reluctant to visit cinemas, fearing Taliban militants may target them. (Xinhua)

BANK FRAUD ALLEGED

The top two officials of Kabul Bank allegedly used fake names, forged documents, fictitious companies and secret records as part of an elaborate ruse to funnel hundreds of millions of dollars to shareholders and top Afghan officials, according to newly obtained documents and interviews. According to US and Afghan officials, the scheme overseen by Sherkhan Farnood, the bank's former chairman, and Khaililullah Frouzi, the chief executive, helped to cover up a vast disbursement of funds to Afghanistan's ruling elite. Farnood and Frouzi have been arrested but both deny responsibility. (Washington Post)

BANK "LOOTED"

The outgoing US ambassador to Afghanistan has described the corruption-ridden Afghan bank Kabulbank as being like a "giant looting scheme" at the time of its near collapse and said those responsible for fleecing depositors should be brought to justice. Karl Eikenberry said that fraud and mismanagement at Kabulbank had brought the country's largest private lender to the brink of collapse last year after it emerged that fraudulent loans worth hundreds of millions of dollars had been made to influential customers. (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty)

"NO BANK CRISIS" - CLAIM

Afghanistan's acting central bank governor Mohebullah Safi claimed the country's second largest private lender Azizi Bank is not in crisis. Safi said the central bank was investigating investment problems with Azizi Bank, but stated that its \$588 million in reserves are safe. (CNN)

"WASTEFUL" PROJECTS

Inefficient and unsustainable construction projects in Afghanistan have swallowed billions in American taxpayer dollars, and may contribute little to defeating the Taliban, but no one's certain who is to blame, according to US Senator Claire McCaskill. Around \$61 billion already has been spent, and President Barack Obama has requested \$17.3 billion for reconstruction contracts in Afghanistan in next year's budget. The Defense Department has 90,800 contractors in Afghanistan. Costs for a recently completed project, the 64-mile Gardez-Khost highway between Afghanistan and Pakistan, ballooned from \$69 million to \$176 million. Larry Walker, the president of the Louis Berger Group, a consulting company hired to build the highway, said the high price tag was due to the security situation rapidly degrading mid-project. The project experienced 147 direct attacks, and around 150 encounters with explosive devices. Twenty-one employees have been killed and 51 wounded. (McClatchy Newspapers)

WORLD FOOD AID CUT

The UN World Food Programme (WFP) is being forced by a funding shortfall to cut its recovery programmes in nearly half of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. "We are having to refocus our activities to continue supporting those who are most in need, especially in provinces that have the largest number of people who are either very highly food insecure or very food insecure," said WFP spokesperson Challiss McDonough, "We will also continue school feeding in the south because of the role it plays in getting children, especially girls, to enrol and attend school." (IRIN)

ELECTRICITY SYSTEM "SHAMBLES"

Kandahar's electrical system in shambles, despite years of foreign aid, according to the engineer who has the thankless job of running the utility company in Kandahar province. Through years of war and then neglect under Taliban rule, Fazal Ahmad has kept the shambolic system running, however imperfectly, by patching it with just about anything he could scrounge short of chewing gum and rubber bands. Hundreds of billions of dollars have been spent on stabilizing and rebuilding Afghanistan, yet the electrical system in the country's second-largest city is on the verge of collapse. (Globe and Mail)

70% NO ACCESS TO DRINKING WATER

Afghan Ministry of Urban Development on Wednesday say that 70 percent of the Kabul residents do not have access to safe drinking water. This figure will change to 50 percent in the next two years with support of Germany, officials said. The Afghan Ministry of Urban Development has recently signed an agreement with a German company for water supply networks to be developed in parts of Kabul city in the next two years. Germany will meet the project costs of 25.5 million dollars. (Tolo News)

INFRASTRUCTURE SPENDING QUESTIONED

Military commanders in Afghanistan tapped a new \$400 million Defense Department infrastructure fund to bring electricity to Kandahar and begin building provincial justice centres as part of the military's program to secure Kandahar and Helmand provinces, according to senior administration officials. Democrat Senator Claire McCaskill highlighted the Pentagon's payments of \$40 million for imported diesel fuel to power generators in Kandahar city, \$86 million for power transmission between the cities of Chimtal and Gardez, and \$20 million for provincial justice centres, all from the new fund. (Washington Post)

SCHOLARSHIPS HALTED

The US State Department has suspended a popular youth exchange scholarship programme that has brought hundreds of Afghan high school students to small communities in the US since 2004. (NPR)

KIDNAPPED DEMINERS, ENGINEERS FREED

Armed Taliban militants killed four deminers but freed another 24 of the 28 they kidnapped from Farah province west of Kabul after five days. All those kidnapped were employees of a mine-clearing agency, Demining Agency for Afghanistan (DAFA). Two Turkish engineers of three kidnapped in Afghanistan in May, were freed by their captors, said Turkish officials. Salih Gul, Ersin Ozturk and Kemalettin Gul were kidnapped south of Kabul in May. Gul had been freed earlier. (Xinhua)

JOURNALISTS FREED

A French journalist who was freed last months after being held hostage for 18 months in Afghanistan says money and prisoners may have been exchanged to secure his release from the Taliban. France-3 television reporter Herve Ghesquiere told BBC News that officially there was no ransom. Ghesquiere, videographer Stephane Taponier and their Afghan translator were freed after being abducted in December 2009 while working on a story about reconstruction east of Kabul. Two Afghan journalists who were kidnapped along with them were freed earlier. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the kidnapping. The French government denied a ransom was paid to secure the journalists' release, but the Taliban said that Ghesquiere and Taponier had been freed in exchange for the release of Taliban prisoners. (BBC, AF, AFP)

BASE UNDER ATTACK

A base for South Korean reconstruction workers in Afghanistan has come under another apparent rocket attack. Rocket-propelled grenades fell outside the base, located in the Afghanistan city of Charika, the 12th attack this year. No casualties were been reported. (Xinhua)

BORDER CONTROLS EASED

The Afghanistan and Iranian customs departments have signed a co-operation agreement to help resolve trade transit challenges between the two nations. The Afghan General Customs Department said that border gates between the two countries will be open from 6.30 am to 6.30 pm each day and trucks could cross in and out without stopping. (Tolo News)

NEW JAILS TO BE BUILT

The US plans to build more jails in the Afghan war zone. Afghanistan will take over the Parwan detention facility later this year. Hoping to create a new justice model, the US military set up a judicial complex near the prison, but complaints from troops and Afghans persist throughout the country. High-risk detainees from Parwan are likely to remain in US custody and be transferred to new US-run facilities. (Stars and Stripes)

AFGHAN SPORTS

Thousands of Afghans from all over the United States, Canada, Europe, Asia, and Afghanistan gathered at Howison Park in Prince William County, Virginia, and the Maryland Soccerplex Stadium of Washington DC Metropolitan area to celebrate the Afghan Sports Federation's 14th annual "Afghan Cup" sporting and cultural event. The four-day event included men's and women's volleyball, basketball, youth, men's and women's soccer. (Afghanistan News Centre)

BUTCHER CLASSES

US special forces commanders in Afghanistan now want their troops to learn how to butcher meat and cook authentic meals for village elders. The military is planning a three-day abattoir training course for troops. (AFP)