

What's happening away from the fighting in Afghanistan during w/e February 3 2012
By Caroline Cameron, Great North News Services

Afghan olive farms waiting for water

THE South Eastern Afghan province of Nangarhar was once home to thousands of hectares of olive groves, but residents say water and electricity shortages, combined with land-grabs and war, have left the industry devastated.

State-run farms here once produced 8,000 tons of olives in a season, but in the decade since the fall of the Taleban, labourers have harvested a total of just 1,400 tons. Last year, the harvest was little over half a ton.

Buried treasure

FOR 1,500 years, the sandstone cliffs of Afghanistan's Bamiyan valley encased two towering Buddhas peering sleepily from their caves onto patches of magnolia trees.

Nearly 11 years ago, however, the statues were destroyed by tanks, explosives and anti-aircraft weapons on the orders of the Taliban government, which condemned the Buddhas as "idols." So if you flew into the smog-filled skies of Kabul today, interested in looking for one of the country's most important Buddhist sites, you'd have to head 25 miles southeast, where you'd find yourself at Mes Aynak, on the edge of the tiny but strategically located Logar province.

Mes Aynak is a sprawling, mountainous, 9,800-acre site studded with artefacts that archaeologists believe are as significant as the Bamiyan Buddhas, as well as the remains of civilizations that stretch back to the time of Alexander the Great.

It is also, coincidentally, a copper mine - in fact, it's the site of the second-largest copper deposit in the world. Mes Aynak is one of dozens of known sites across Afghanistan

brimming with rich deposits of other minerals - iron ore, lithium and cobalt.

"Art is the one thing that gives the message to people outside that we are

not just fighters and terrorists."

No early pull-out for British troops in Afghanistan

BRITAIN says it will stand by Afghanistan, keeping troops there until 2014.

British Prime Minister David Cameron told reporters Saturday he has no plans to pull his country's combat troops from Afghanistan before the current deadline expires.

He also said Britain will continue to have a strong relationship with Kabul going forward because "it is in the interests of the whole world to have a safe and stable Afghanistan that is free from the terrorism."

Mr Cameron's comments followed a meeting with Afghan President Hamid Karzai

outside London. The British leader said his country will continue to provide Afghanistan with aid after its troops withdraw in 2014.

His position differed from that of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who met with Mr. Karzai on Friday. Mr. Sarkozy said French troops will complete their withdrawal from the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan a year earlier than planned, at the end of 2013.

The French president also said France will transfer security to the Afghans in March in the eastern province of Kapisa, where nearly all French troops are based and where last week's killing of the four unarmed soldiers took place.

Afghan lawmaker blasts France's early troop withdrawal

AN Afghan lawmaker has sharply criticized France's plans to hand over security in her troubled province to Afghan troops within a few months, saying that her country's forces are unprepared to handle the job and more violence would result.

Tahira Mujadedi, a member of parliament from Kapisa province, also criticized France's decision to withdraw all of its troops from Afghanistan early.

She said Saturday that it would be "a big mistake" for President Hamid Karzai to back a French proposal to speed up the overall NATO timetable for handing all combat operations to Afghan forces to 2013, a year earlier than

now planned.

Afghanistan to press Pakistan for access to Taliban

AFGHANISTAN will press Pakistan for access to Taliban leaders during a one-day visit to Kabul by Pakistan's foreign minister, with Afghan officials hoping to ease cross-border strains and lay the ground for peace negotiations with the insurgents.

Hina Rabbani Khar will visit Kabul on February 1 to discuss reconciliation and nascent plans for peace talks ahead of a meeting between representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban in Saudi Arabia.

Khar's trip will mark the first high-level meetings between officials from the countries in months.

Pakistan is seen as critical to U.S. efforts to stabilize Afghanistan before foreign combat troops leave in 2014.

French decision to accelerate exit causes some Afghans to question NATO

THE announcement by France last week that it would speed up the exit of its troops from Afghanistan has been greeted with a mixture of cynicism, disbelief and concern by politicians here.

"It may have a bad impact on other NATO allies," said Shukria Barakzai, an Afghan parliamentarian and chairwoman of the National Assembly's defense committee. She said the announcement "might provide an excuse for other countries" to leave Afghanistan before the end of 2014, when NATO is scheduled to end its combat mission.

Mawlawi Qalamuddin, a member of Afghanistan's High Peace Council and formerly the Taliban's minister of vice and virtue, dismissed the statement by French President Nicolas Sarkozy — which came after an Afghan soldier killed four French soldiers on Jan. 20 — as mere rhetoric.

"Emotional comments are not credible," said Qalamuddin, "and it doesn't seem logical. It's not possible that France will withdraw before scheduled because France is member of NATO, and the rest of NATO is here."

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