

Afghanistan news round up w/e January 14th 2012
By Caroline Cameron, Great North News Services
Taliban makes 'friends' on Facebook and 'trends' on Twitter
THE Taliban is aggressively employing sophisticated communication techniques ranging from the internet and text messages to social media such as Facebook and Twitter to spread their message.
"We are using modern techniques of communication because we want our voice to be heard all over," Zabihullah Mujahid, the main spokesman for the Afghan Taliban, said in email. "You can't win war without this. It's key to victory."
The militants, operating on both sides of the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, have launched robust public-relations campaigns in both countries, which is making it difficult for two governments and their international allies to win the war of words with the Taliban.
Perhaps the most effective propaganda tools for the militants are the video films and statements recorded on CDs and DVDs, some of which make their way to the militant websites and are posted on YouTube.
They include emotional speeches, pro-Taliban poems and songs in Pashto, Urdu and Arabic and footage of destruction caused by foreign forces in Afghanistan and Pakistani forces on their side of the border.
Terrorist attack foiled in S Afghanistan
TERROR attack was thwarted in Afghanistan's southern Helmand province, the provincial government said on New Year's Day
The terrorists intended to attack an official ceremony in Nawa district during which security responsibilities of the district were handed over from NATO-led coalition troops to Afghan security forces, it said.
Explosion rocks Kandahar
A BLAST rocked Afghanistan's southern Kandahar province on Jan 1, causing no casualties, police said.
"There was a blast in Sanzarai area of Zhari district in the wee hours Sunday but it was a controlled explosion" a police official in Kandahar city told Xinhua.
The police official said Afghan and NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) security forces discovered and detonated a handful of explosives at around 8:30 a.m. local time Sunday, but no one was injured.
From the caves of Tora Bora to an office in Qatar: is the Taliban going mainstream?
The Afghan Taliban said it has reached a preliminary agreement to open a political office in the Gulf state of Qatar, in a move that could help facilitate peace talks to end the war in Afghanistan.
Number of UN staff killed in line of duty doubled in 2011
UNITED Nations staff members were the primary target in several terror attacks during 2011, with more than twice as many personnel killed than in the previous year.
In a statement, the UN Staff Union said a total of 35 UN workers were killed last year, including 25 civilians, nine peacekeepers, and a military advisor.
Two of the three worst attacks of the year took place in Afghanistan.
US army's new Afghan nightmare how to ship \$30bn of kit
THE US army has begun the massive task of withdrawing \$30bn (19bn) worth of military equipment from Afghanistan three years before most NATO troops leave, with logisticians warning of complications from the lack of decent roads and the nightmarish geography of a landlocked country surrounded by states that are either fickle American allies or outright enemies.
Planners say the complex and costly exercise must start now because of the quantity of equipment involved. Some of the tens of thousands of vehicles sent to the country have already started their journey back to American bases in the US and Germany.
"We have had 10 years of bringing things in, with none of it leaving," said a senior official based in Kabul with the International Security Assistance Force (Isaf), the US-led Nato operation in Afghanistan.
Afghanistan's Little Bollywood
AT FIRST sight, the green tents

standing in a row in the southeastern Afghan city of Jalalabad look like they might be temporary shelter for a group of refugees, but they serve a very different purpose. In a city known as "Little Mumbai" as the nearest thing Afghanistan has to Bollywood, the tents are the local cinema. For around a US dollar a time, Jalalabad residents can come in and watch a locally-made film in their own language, Pashto. The tent cinemas are only open for business on public holidays. Gaps in the cloth are patched up to prevent daylight getting in.

Can Afghan forces manage alone in Helmand?

AS AFGHAN forces prepare to take over from international troops, some residents of the troubled southern province of Helmand worry that they are not yet up to the job. Although Helmand no longer suffers from the kind of intense fighting that was common three years ago, residents say security is not well enough established for the handover to be a success. They say that after Lashkar Gah was handed over, it was hit by a number of suicide attacks, so the withdrawal of foreign troops from rural districts is likely to allow the Taleban to move back into areas from which they were partly or wholly expelled.

Afghans fear for sustainability of economic boom

US generals measure the war in Afghanistan by numbers, seeking to distil a messy conflict into neat graphs of troop levels, roadside bombings and suicide attacks. To gauge hopes for the country's future, they might consider a new indicator: sales of Red Bull. On the one hand, surging imports of the straw-coloured energy drink - now a staple at wedding parties thrown by the Kabul elite - are emblematic of Afghanistan's galloping economy. They also signal danger: the booming business of war has fed a rise in consumption without fostering enough of the private investment needed to underpin more durable growth.

As a security handover to Afghan forces looms in 2014, fears are growing that cuts to donor aid and spending by Nato could trigger a slowdown, placing a new kind of pressure on the fragile state.

US cargo drone being tested in Afghanistan

THE US military is testing a revolutionary new drone for its arsenal, a pilotless helicopter intended to fly cargo missions to remote outposts where frequent roadside bombs threaten access by convoys. Surveillance drones for monitoring enemy activity and armed versions for launching airstrikes have become a trademark of America's wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East. But this is the first time a chopper version designed for transport has been used.

Two unmanned models of the Kaman K-MAX helicopters and a team of 16 company technicians and eight Marines are conducting a six-month evaluation programme for the new craft at Camp Dwyer, a Marine Corps airfield in the Garmsir district of southern Helmand Province. The craft have flown 20 transport missions since the inaugural flight on Dec. 17, said Maj. Kyle O'Connor, the officer in charge of the detachment. They have delivered nearly 18 tons of cargo, mainly thousands of Meals Ready to Eat and spare parts needed at the forward operating bases.

Bomb kills 29 in NW Pakistan

PAKISTANI officials say a bomb blast near the Afghan border has killed at least 29 people and wounded at least 37 others, in one of the deadliest attacks in the country's northwest in months. Authorities say a remote-control bomb in a truck exploded in the Khyber tribal agency on Tuesday (Jan 10). The blast struck near a bus terminal in the town of Jamrud, destroying several vehicles parked near a fuel pump. There was no immediate claim of responsibility. But some officials said the attack targeted members of the Zakhakhel tribe, which has formed a militia to fight against the Taliban in the region.