

Afghanistan under occupation: An assessment- Part three

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This is the conclusion of a three-part series examining the situation in Afghanistan five years after the US-led invasion. Part 1 was posted on February 14; Part 2 was posted on February 15.

The largely ruined or neglected state of much of Afghanistan's basic infrastructure enabled US construction companies, following the invasion of 2001, to use the billions of dollars of international "development aid" as a huge slush fund.

More than 90 percent of the Karzai regime's budget is funded by foreign aid. A *New York Times* article on November 7, 2005, noted that many Afghans, including government ministers, see the US-led US\$1.3 billion reconstruction project as wasteful and slow-moving, benefiting foreigners far more than themselves. It also noted a July report by the Government Accountability Office sharply criticising American reconstruction effort and the department leading it, the US Agency for International Development.

Those directly involved in administering the aid programmes offer a variety of self-serving, albeit often revealing, excuses as to why potentially large sums of money and the efforts of several major contractors have made no discernable impact on the project to rebuild hospitals, school and roads.

The United Nation's former senior envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, who presided over much of the aid programme, told the BBC, "The way we are doing it is really lousy. We are too late, too bureaucratic, and frankly we spend too much money on ourselves rather than developing the skills of Afghans."

Francesc Vendrell, the former UN envoy who is now the European Union representative in Kabul, said, "In 2002, the warlords and commanders were shaking in their boots fearing they were going to be disarmed or cast aside.... Now it's much more difficult."

Other critics have concluded that they were wrong not to resist US directives, and bring the Taliban into the political process as early as 2002. They also accuse the Karzai elite of confiding in former mujahedin factional leaders, who are widely blamed for the destruction of Kabul during the civil war of the 1990s, and of appointing provincial governors and police chiefs with highly dubious political records.

As nepotistic and corrupt as the Karzai regime has revealed itself to be, this would still not account for the disappearance of such huge sums of money. For this gargantuan level of corruption, it was necessary for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to involve the US transnational construction, engineering and security companies.

Below are just some of the major US-based corporations (sourced from the *Centre for Public Integrity—Windfalls of War—U.S. Contractors in Afghanistan & Iraq*; <http://www.publicintegrity.org/wow/>) that have squeezed huge profits from the country, most of which also have vast interests in Iraq.

Louis Berger Group (LBG), a New Jersey-based engineering consulting company, was awarded contracts by USAID worth US\$665 million to build schools, health clinics, roads and power systems across several

provinces. Of the 96 clinics and schools marked for completion by September 2004, just 9 clinics and 2 schools were ready and passed inspection. (See also report for Corpwatch by Afghan-American journalist, Fariba Nawa.)

It was also awarded the US\$250 million project to resurface the 483-kilometre (300-mile) Kabul-Kandahar highway. Afghan journalist Mirwais Harooni reported that even though other international companies had been ready to rebuild the highway for US\$250,000 per kilometre, LBG got the contract at US\$700,000 per kilometre.

The Bush administration has been pressuring for the highway to be turned into a toll road, charging each driver US\$20 for a road-use permit valid for one month and raising some US\$30 million annually from Afghanistan's impoverished citizens.

Washington Construction Group (WGI) is one of the largest construction and engineering firms in the US. In January 2003, the company had a contract backlog of US\$2.8 billion. Executive vice-president and CFO George H. Juetten was previously senior vice-president and CFO for Dresser Industries, a subsidiary of Halliburton Inc. WGI spent a total of US\$1,520,000 in 2001-2002 on lobbying the US Congress.

Perini Corp. is one of the largest "general contractors" in the US. At the end of 2004, its revenue was almost US\$2 billion. Perini is headquartered in Massachusetts and has many major construction projects in the state. Chairman and CEO Ronald Tutor and billionaire investor Richard Blum, who together hold 75 percent of Perini's voting stock, control the company. Blum is the husband of US Democrat Senator Dianne Feinstein from California, who serves on the Appropriations Committee and the Select Committee on Intelligence.

In April 2003, the US Army Corps of Engineers' Transatlantic Programmes Centre announced that it had awarded three contracts "to rapidly execute design and construction services as needed anywhere" in the area of operations for the US military's Central Command (CENTCOM). The one-year contracts awarded to Fluor Intercontinental, Perini Corp. and WGI were indefinite delivery/indefinite quantity (ID/IQ) contracts with a possible value of US\$100 million. In September 2003, the US Army Corps of Engineers issued additional task orders totalling US\$278 million on the three contracts, and the Corps decided to raise the contract ceiling from US\$100 million to US\$500 million.

Contract International Inc. has its headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, and receives international public works and defence projects financed by the US government. In January 2003, Contract was awarded an indefinite delivery/indefinite quantity contract to perform design and construction services at military bases and other infrastructure projects in Afghanistan. The total value of the contract could reach US\$500 million.

Chemonics International, based in Washington, D.C., is an exclusively "international development corporation" that relies on USAID for 90 percent of its commercial activity—largely in "developing and war-torn countries."

According to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) response to a request by the Centre for Public Integrity (CPI), Chemonics won a contract in 2003 for US\$599,995,000 and a task order in 2002 for US\$33,833—totalling US\$600,028,833 for work in Afghanistan. USAID described the US\$600 million as being for “socioeconomic assessments” and “food security.”

Chemonics’s principal owner, Scott Spangler, was a senior USAID official during the first Bush administration. His wife, Jean Spangler, is also on Chemonics’s board of directors. From 1990 to 2003, the Spanglers contributed US\$98,460, to the Republican Party. Founder and ex-president Thurston Teele is a former US Foreign Service officer for the State Department.

DynCorp (now owned by Computer Sciences Corp.) is one of the largest private military contractors in the world. It has provided police officers for operations in the Balkans and pilots for the US-led drug-eradication programmes in South America. It has also provided logistical equipment and training for rebel groups in southern Sudan, and it was contracted to operate and maintain helicopters for the Australia-led UN mission in East Timor.

From 1990 to 2002, DynCorp had contracts worth almost US\$11.8 billion with the US government. Computer Sciences Corp. (CSC) had some 1,000 US government contracts from 1990 to 2002, worth US\$15.8 billion. In November 2002, the State Department’s Diplomatic Security Services took over responsibility for President Hamid Karzai’s security from the US military. Part of the work was then contracted out to DynCorp.

Kellogg, Brown & Root (KBR) is the engineering and construction arm of the Halliburton Company, which describes itself as “the world’s largest diversified energy services, engineering and construction company,” with operations in more than 100 countries and sales of US\$12.4 billion in 2002.

When the US forces joined with NATO in the Balkans in 1995, KBR was also deployed. The General Accounting Office (GAO) reported in February 1997 that KBR had overrun its estimated costs in the Balkans by 32 percent, but it was awarded a new contract for Balkan logistical support. In September 2000, the GAO released another report claiming the Army had not reined in contractor costs, placing the total cost of the Balkan contract at US\$2.2 billion.

KBR was awarded a State Department contract in August 2002 to design and construct office buildings and diplomatic staff apartments for the US embassy in Kabul. By March 2004, KBR had won reconstruction work worth some US\$3.9 billion in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Some analysts view the small amounts of money and effort spent on the actual reconstruction of Afghanistan’s basic infrastructure, and the fact that it contains no known reserves of oil and gas, as proof that the region constitutes nothing more than a buffer state between the different “spheres of influence” of the major powers.

Professor Marc W. Herold of the University of New Hampshire argues in his paper “Afghanistan as an empty space—The perfect Neo-Colonial state of the 21st century”:

“Western powers have no interest in either buying from or selling to the blighted nation. The impoverished Afghan civilian population is as irrelevant as is the nation’s economic development. But the space represented by Afghanistan in a volatile region of geo-political import, is to be kept vacant from all hostile forces. The country is situated at the centre of a resurgent Islamic world, close to a rising China (and India) and the restive ex-Soviet Asian republics, and adjacent to oil-rich states.”

(<http://www.cursor.org/stories/emptyspace.html>)

The creation of a primitive fortified Afghanistan would indeed conform to the past colonial experience that the Afghan region has undergone, particularly with British imperialism. Through three military interventions (the Anglo-Afghan wars of 1839-1842, 1878-1881 and 1919), the British

Army sought to frustrate tsarist Russia from wresting control of “British India” to the east.

This conception, however, conforms to the past rather than the present. The significance of the Afghan territories for world imperialism has been transformed through the discovery of vast reserves of both oil and natural gas in Central Asia in the twentieth century, and ever-increased reliance on them by the major economies in the twenty-first century.

Today, control over the whole of the Central Asian/Caspian region is viewed by the imperialist powers as a vital “life and death” struggle. As the current undisputed military power, the US aims to claim this region for itself, thereby frustrating its rivals in Europe, Japan, Russia and China while obtaining vitally needed resources to help offset its economic decline.

Although Afghanistan contains no significant oil reserves (it does contain natural gas reserves, estimated at 5 trillion cubic feet), it is strategically located in a region that has them in abundance. The Caspian Basin has estimated oil and natural gas reserves worth US\$4 trillion. It encompasses the former Soviet states of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan.

All five of these states are immediately to Afghanistan’s northern border. Since the November 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, all of these states now have US troops stationed within them.

All sections of the US political and military establishment have signalled their support for an imminent and bloody confrontation with the Afghan insurgency. This is of urgent necessity if plans are to be revived for the construction of a “trans-Afghan pipeline” for the big oil corporations to get oil out from the Caspian, via Turkmenistan (crucially avoiding Russia and Iran), Afghanistan and Pakistan to tankers in the Arabian Sea.

It was negotiations over just such a pipeline, between UNOCAL and the Taliban, that broke down and prompted the US, under the Clinton administration, to first move against the fundamentalist regime in 1998.

In a briefing last month, Lt. Gen. Karl Eikenberry, the US commander in Afghanistan, said, “On the surface, we’re going to have some violence here this spring.”

A US congressional delegation, including Democratic presidential aspirant Hillary Clinton, travelled to Afghanistan on January 14 to discuss with Karzai whether more US troops should be sent to fight the Afghan insurgency. At a news conference on the delegation’s return, Clinton called the reconstruction and anti-terror mission satisfactory but “fragile,” commenting, “We expect a big spring offensive.” Clinton also wrote to Defence Secretary Robert Gates urging him to send more troops to Afghanistan.

The Bush administration recently concluded a strategic internal review of US policy in Afghanistan. It called for boosting foreign troops and increasing funding for Afghan security forces before an expected Taliban offensive this spring.

On February 1, British Defence Secretary Des Browne announced that the UK is to increase its military presence in southern Afghanistan by around 800 troops to a force of 5,800. Britain has recently handed over military command of NATO’s International Security Assistance Force to the American general Dan McNeill. The United States recently doubled its ground combat forces, adding 2,500 soldiers for the next few months, and asked Congress for US\$10.6 billion more for Afghan security forces and reconstruction (of this sum, at least US\$8 billion has been allocated for security).

Defence Secretary Gates is touring the world to prepare for a summer offensive and to urge the European powers to fall in behind the plan. On February 9, he spoke at a meeting of NATO defence ministers in Seville, Spain, followed by an address to the 43rd Conference on Security Policy in Munich, Germany, on February 11.

Speaking in Pakistan on February 12, after meeting President Pervez

Musharraf, he spoke of Washington and Islamabad's "mutual effort to help the Afghans drive the Soviet troops from their territory," adding, "After the Soviets left, the United States made a mistake. We neglected Afghanistan and extremism took control of that country.... We won't make that mistake again. We are here for the long haul."

A US/NATO offensive in the months ahead foreshadows yet more death and destruction in Afghanistan, as well as creating more instability in the region.

Concluded



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