

An exposure of corruption: Afghanistan, on the Dollar Trail

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The documentary, *Afghanistan, on the Dollar Trail*, which was aired this month on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) program "Four Corners", is a well-produced exposure of the corruption and criminality that has accompanied the "reconstruction" of Afghanistan since the 2001 US invasion.

The timing of its screening was not accidental. Particularly in the wake of the widespread vote-rigging in the August 20 presidential poll, the media has been highlighting government corruption in Afghanistan as a major reason for the growth of the Taliban insurgency amid speculation that President Hamid Karzai might be removed.

Blaming the Karzai administration conveniently ignores the fact that pay-offs and bribes have been integral to the US invasion and occupation from the outset. Washington brought down the Taliban regime by buying off a series of warlords who were notorious for their thuggery and criminal activities, including involvement in the drug trade. Karzai was simply installed as the frontman for the puppet regime constructed on this basis.

While the documentary is uncritical of the US occupation, it is, without intending to be, a damning indictment of US propaganda that its invasion of Afghanistan was to improve the lives of the long-suffering Afghan people.

The documentary follows director Paul Moreira as he seeks to track down how some of the estimated \$US18 billion in reconstruction aid to Afghanistan has been used. Last year, a host of countries and organisations attended the "International Afghanistan Support Conference" in Paris. The assembled delegates voted to finance the building of 680 new schools in the country. Moreira makes it his initial task to inspect some of these schools in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan.

Moreira stumbles across one by chance. It is a girl's school in which "a few minor details are missing for the situation to be perfect", comments the narrator, "details like walls and a roof". The students are forced to have lessons outside, with only a

damaged portable blackboard to suggest a classroom setting. There is no protection from the cold. Snow begins to fall. A teacher comments that the students cannot be expected to learn when they are more concerned about staying warm.

Moreira contacts USAID, which can suggest only one other newly-built school to visit in Kabul. Upon arriving, a billboard depicts a modern facility in a pristine surrounding. The next shot is of the school itself. It consists almost entirely of tents. Although the government promised 18 months ago that construction would be finished within two years, all that has been built are a brick wall and some bathrooms.

Moreira comments: "Yet there is one neighbourhood in Kabul where construction is thriving and there are no delays." It is a district where those closely connected to the new regime are building enormous luxury villas and mansions for themselves. The owners of the properties include figures such as the foreign secretary's chief of staff, the chief of police, a provincial governor, a general and the son of a general.

The land for the mansions was made available by levelling slum houses and forcibly removing their inhabitants, supposedly for living in "illegal dwellings". The defence ministry owned the land and sold it for roughly \$3,000 per hectare—basically a gift. This was presided over by none other than "Marshal" Fahim, a former warlord who served as the country's first vice president in 2002 and is one of Karzai's vice presidential partners in the current election process.

Some of the owners include civil servants who earn no more than \$2,000 a month. The mansions cost from \$300,000 to \$1 million. The documentary suggests that the shortfall is made up through dealings in the drug trade—Afghanistan produces 90 percent of the world's opium—or the embezzlement of reconstruction funds.

Moreira has a discussion with the government's anti-narcotics prosecutor, Ahmed Big Quader. He asks if anyone has investigated how the owners of the mansions and villas were able to attain such affluence. Quader replies: "According to the

law we do not have the right to investigate people's private property.”

Moreira also meets up with Izzat Wassifi, the former head of the Anti-Corruption Commission and childhood friend of President Karzai. Before his appointment to a government post, Wassifi was convicted of selling 650 grams of heroin to an undercover FBI agent while on holiday in the US and spent three years in jail.

The occupation forces are well aware of who they have placed in power over the Afghan people.

The documentary examines conditions at the Khair Khana Hospital in Kabul, which is located in a working class area and has to provide health services to 1.5 million people. It was ostensibly renovated five years ago and a new wing added. As Moreira tours the hospital, he shows that its walls are literally crumbling away in places. The water taps in the new wing leak so severely they are not used.

The hospital provides a case study in how reconstruction funds are actually spent in Afghanistan. A grant of \$2.2 million was allocated to complete the renovation and it was supervised by an official from UNOPS—a United Nations support unit.

UNOPS kept \$270,000 as an “operating expense commission”. The remaining \$1.93 million was initially allocated to Intersos, an Italian non-government organisation. The NGO kept \$1 million, ostensibly to buy washbowls, wash tubs and electrical wire needed for the renovation. A control commission into the project by a public prosecutor in Kabul revealed that Intersos used a large portion of the money to finance “operating expenses”, including an entire communications network and new rugs for its offices.

UNOPS supposedly paid the remaining \$930,000 to the Afghan-based Chardehi Rehabilitation Organisation to carry out work on the hospital. The company did not have a licence or even an address. A subsequent UN investigation into the UNOPS official who supervised the project found that he had embezzled \$500,000.

The level of corruption in this one instance is staggering. What was not spent on “operating expenses” or simply stolen of the original \$2.2 million went into purchasing sub-quality construction materials, which rapidly deteriorated and left the hospital in its current state of disintegration and disrepair.

The documentary visually shows the chasm between the Afghan population and the pro-occupation elite. The overviews of Kabul streets give an insight into the poverty and deprivation afflicting the majority. On a busy intersection, ordinary people

describe how difficult it is to find work and how they have not eaten in days.

One man states: “Times were better during the war. The poor would die from bullets. Today they die from hunger.” This is followed with images of the Kabul mansions. At the school, shots of tents being wrenched from the ground by blasts of cold wind are juxtaposed with the veritable hive of activity at the construction site of a new villa.

Despite its revelations of official corruption and social inequality, the documentary has significant political weaknesses. Moreira views the criminality that surrounds so-called reconstruction as a blemish on an otherwise legitimate war. He accepts uncritically the claims of the US and its NATO allies that they are in Afghanistan for the benefit of the Afghan people. He presents the ongoing poverty, infant mortality and corruption as “mistakes” that the occupation forces should fix.

This viewpoint is similar to that of US commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, who argues that the endemic corruption of the Karzai regime has become a major obstacle to the stability of the US-led occupation. His conclusion is that at least 40,000 more American troops are needed to ensure military control over the major cities, transport links and agricultural areas.

In reality, the corrupt and venal character of the US puppet regime in Kabul is a product of the criminal character of the entire US enterprise, which aims to subjugate an entire country and use it as a base for operations in energy-rich Central Asia. Payoffs, whether directly or indirectly, are the only means for propping up the network of warlords and thugs on which the widely despised Karzai administration and the occupation as a whole rests.

The systematic plunder of reconstruction funds is one of the ways that sections of the Afghan elite, as well as various corporations and international aid organisations, are “paid” for their collaboration with an imperialist agenda. It is not an aberration or a mistake. The same phenomenon has been seen in other recent neo-colonial operations in Kosovo, East Timor and, on a far grander scale, Iraq.

Afghanistan, on the Dollar Trail is available online at <http://www.abc.net.au/iview/#/series/four%20corners> until Sunday, November 1. It was aired on Monday, October 19.



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