

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH U.S. ARMY COLONEL MIKE WEHR, DIRECTOR, COMBINED JOINT ENGINEER OFFICE, NATO TRAINING MISSION-AFGHANISTAN, COMBINED SECURITY TRANSITION COMMAND-AFGHANISTAN, VIA TELECONFERENCE SUBJECT: ENGINEERING EFFORTS IN SUPPORT OF THE AFGHAN NATIONAL ARMY AND POLICE FOR FACILITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE THAT WILL ENABLE AN ORDERLY TRANSITION TO AFGHAN GOVERNANCE TIME: 10:30 A.M. EDT DATE: WEDNESDAY, JUNE 16, 2010

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LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): With that, I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Wednesday, June 16th, 2010. My name is Lieutenant Jennifer g with the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs and I'll be moderating this call today.

A note to the bloggers on the call, please remember to clearly state your name and the organization you're with prior to asking your questions. And also, if possible, while the Colonel -- our guest speaker is speaking today, please also try to place your phone on mute so we can make sure we hear what he has to say. With that, I'd like to introduce you to our guest speaker today. His name is U.S. Army Colonel Mike Wehr. He's the director of Combined Joint Engineer Office with the NATO Training Mission- Afghanistan, Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan. Without further ado, I'm going to turn it over to the Colonel, if he'd like to start with an opening statement, and then we'll go to questions.

Sir, the floor is yours.

COL. WEHR: Thanks, Lieutenant Cragg.

Good morning. This is Colonel Mike Wehr, and it's a real privilege to have this opportunity to speak with you on the engineer effort that's going on here in Afghanistan in support of the national army and police. And the challenges and rewards really do exceed anything I've experienced in really the past 25 years of serving our country. But, quite candidly, I hope to gain as much information from you, perhaps, as what you'll gain from me tonight -- or this morning. So I do welcome the forum and the dialogue.

We have made a significant amount of progress over the past six months of our mission and during -- excuse me, what I was getting to is that we've made a significant amount of progress in the last six months since I have been here. And there was a distinct challenge. There is no doubt that, as we lean forward and accelerate the fielding of forces, whether it be the police or the army, we have significant challenges in keeping up with facilities.

The model that I use is: man, equip, train and shelter. And I use that word "shelter" for a very specific reason, which I'll explain. We have a diverse group of engineers that get this mission done. There's about 90 folks on our team. And, again, it is not alone that we do this mission. We interact with the other commands in IJC and ISAF, and we really form a network with our execution agents, which are the Corps of Engineers, and the Air Force also provides instruction.

Our mission is to ensure adequate facilities as we generate the Afghan national security forces, and that ranges from tents, containers or connexes, to pre-engineered buildings, to more enduring facilities -- brick and mortar, for example.

Another mission we have is to develop the engineer leadership at the ministerial level. We recognize that we're jump-starting the infrastructure of this nation for their police and army. We have to keep the ministerial development up to speed as well, because they, of course, will be taking this over in the transition. So the more we can do at shoulder-to-shoulder, as we do it, the better. And, again, getting them to work through their own budget, as that comes on-line, is very critical. So we have to demonstrate their capabilities. So that ministerial development is essential. And the fourth one, of course -- I'm sorry, the third bullet that I've got is to ensure we're developing a sustainable capacity and a capability, really do an orderly transition that has to take place. And on that note, we are constantly deciding how best to execute construction. If we do an immediate build that gets the requirement done, that may satisfy the construction of the building. But what we're really after is the building of an enduring capability within Afghanistan, specifically for the engineers. So it doesn't do us a lot of good if we're just constructing for them. We want them to do it with us, and, in fact, understand how to maintain it also.

We have three imperatives that exemplify our commitment -- (inaudible) -- not only to improve Afghanistan better than the way we found it, but, in fact, leave the area in more capable hands of the host-nation force: We use team, transparency and transition as our three imperatives. And teaming with Afghan ministries -- specifically with the engineer facilities in both the ANA and the ANP, our focus has been on:

One, sheltering that force. In other words, coming up with a location and the correct builds, whether it be a tent or an enduring structure. And then, of course, sustaining those facilities. The tents certainly are not necessarily something we'd sustain, but there are legacy facilities also that need maintenance. So those are two parts of our ministerial development that support that team imperative.

As an example of doing this, we have instigated -- or started the facility shura. We've been doing this for about four months now. And what this does is it expands the solution to some of the more specific engineer problems that we may face, whether involving the G-3 of the Army, or just yesterday we had three deputy ministers in the conference, or shura, that helped identify solutions that were much broader than, perhaps, an engineer solution that might have just involved land or a construction issue. So we've got to broaden that perspective with our ministerial development team.

We certainly want to be transparent, as the second initiative for the imperative. And that is done within our CJ engineer shop by ensuring adequate facilities are generated, of course, to educate the folks that would maintain them, that includes training; and of course employing a robust amount of people or skilled labor that will take care of these facilities. And we also recognize that building, like I had mentioned earlier, may not be the right answer in the long run. It may be an Afghan solution that we have to patiently develop with them.

And, of course, the last imperative is that transition. Again, the security responsibility for Afghanistan, to a national security force that can protect the population and safeguard their nation, relies heavily on a infrastructure that they can work out of and operate out of at all different locations, whether it be the borders, through our border police, or inside Kabul, a national infrastructure. So, again, that transition is key. That would be in the ministerial development, in the coaching. We're supporting milestones for infrastructure maintenance, for example, all the way out to 2013. So we have a long-range perspective while we also handle the very short-range, immediate need to shelter the forces. Just one example: The development of the Afghan army engineers is perhaps a year out. We're starting a school that is going to be on-board this month. It's in July, actually. And that is just the ("seed corn," ?) as I would call it, for the future engineer force within the army. And that also breeds the facility engineers as well, would parallel that effort.

So with those opening comments, again, I welcome your questions.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you so much, sir.

John Doyle was on the line first.

So, John, please go ahead.

Q Thank you, Lt. Cragg.

Good morning and good evening, Colonel.

We've heard from previous speakers at these roundtable blogs about the plans to build up both the ANA and the ANP. And I'm just wondering, are facilities -- these facilities construction keeping up with the rise in the force?

And also, I think a follow-up -- a quick follow-up on that, are the Afghans at all involved in any of the engineering? I know the engineering -- the focus is on infantry development right now, with the support services coming later. But are they getting on-the-job training, or are you building all the facilities and then you're going to train them in those facilities at a later date? Thank you.

COL. WEHR: Thanks, John, for that great question. (Inaudible)  
-- are facilities keeping up?

And I can, with great confidence, tell you that we have never had a fielding of forces delayed or deterred based on facilities not being available. Now, that, of course, is based on the definition of facilities, whether it be temporary, in terms of tents, or more permanent that come on-line perhaps a year later. We have worked tremendously close with logistics folks to ensure we have "tent cities" essentially, or conex-based camps that come on-line in time. That is truly a battle drill, whether it be locating the property and getting the contract through. There are certainly a lot of Afghans that do the construction.

And I'll get to your second question in a minute. But just to reemphasize, we have been able to keep up with the fielding of the forces, and that's both the police and the army. Both have a little different or unique building requirement. The army is traditionally consolidated, and of course the police are more dispersed. So that has, in itself, a few different challenges. But, again, we are able to keep up with that fielding as it comes on-line.

To get to your second part of the question: Are the Afghans involved? They are involved from the very beginning, in terms of location. This, in fact, is one of our challenges, as we are (patient ?) with the Afghan solution, is that we are ensuring that, whether it be the ministry of defense or interior, identify where those units should go.

In terms of the engineering expertise in construction, I meet practically weekly -- and I have a team of folks that meet twice a week with Brigadier General Habibullah of the ANA, and Brigadier General Atgar (sp) of the ministry of interior, facilities specifically. So they are very involved in, again, in the process of getting the construction ready and helping us work through the challenges, in terms of actual implementation.

If your question was related to the engineers within the army -- the troops, I can tell you, as you mentioned, that the infantry-centric focus, again, to gain security, or perhaps the clear phase of the COIN operation, has pushed the engineers out to about this year. We're, in fact, opening up the engineer school up in (Mazar-e-Sharif ?), albeit a temporary facility, to start their training.

There are engineers that are out there. They're not yet trained. But, in fact, that is one of our clear missions. We do have equipment for them. But it's one of our clear missions to get them on-board, because we recognize they, of course, can have a great impact on force protection, for example, building combat outposts. The fact is, we

are contracting that type of work. And keeping up with the newer forces is a little awkward, of course, when you're a contractor, so the more we bring them on, the better.

Does that get to your question?

(No response audible.)

Q Question over here.

LT. CRAGG: Great. John, thank you.

And then, Joe, I'll be calling you after Chuck. Chuck had called in before you.

So, Chuck, go ahead; and, Joe, I'll call on you next.

Q Yes, thank you for taking our call. This is Chuck Simmins, from America's North Shore Journal.

I wanted to ask about --

COL. WEHR: (Inaudible.)

Q -- brick and mortar, if I could --

COL. WEHR: Sure.

Q -- in the very basic sense of the word. What sorts of construction industry does Afghanistan have? What materials are they producing on their own? And what sorts of equipment are we providing Afghan engineers to allow them to both support the Afghan civilian side and to get their own jobs done?

COL. WEHR: Chuck, that is a -- that is a great question.

What I have observed, personally, getting out to different locations, is that the Afghan people are extremely good at brick. Brick and mortar, again, it ranges from mud brick -- it's certainly plentiful, in terms of material, and it ranges all the way up to what we call "CMU," or Concrete Masonry Unit that requires, of course, mortar and more skill with reinforcement. They are capable of doing both of those very well.

We have some Afghan solutions that we refer to that also include wood. I can tell you that we also have contractors that have come in and trained Afghans on even the pre-engineered facilities. They go by various names. One that we are using is called a K-Span, and that's very similar to what we consider a Quonset hut from the Korean era. So they are able to do that.

We certainly have a lot of materials that are coming in, in terms of steel. While not necessarily fabricated here within Afghanistan, it is close by in neighboring nations and the Afghans are

able to erect steel structures with, again, Concrete Masonry Units, or block as well.

In terms of producing materials, I don't have a good feel for what they're physically producing in the industry here. But I know that those examples I just listed are predominant in our construction.

Q Well, I guess -- COL. WEHR: I would like to -- Please.

Q Well, what I was wondering was, do they produce their own cement? Do they have gravel mines? Do they sort the gravel? Do they -- you know, do they have concrete plants? I know there are mobile concrete plants that, very often, military units will -- engineering units will have. Some real basic kinds of things.

Are they able to do those sorts of things?

COL. WEHR: Yes, absolutely.

Just as an example, I see multiple batch plants throughout the country. Cement, of course, is a critical element of that. And they do have quarries that -- and they have quarries that produce gravel or rock in different dimensions. They, of course, have an abundance of river sources of gravel. And I've seen these locations throughout the country.

There is no shortage of materials, in terms of constructing roads. During less secure times, when industry was not functioning, certainly cement was a critical element that perhaps has been brought in. But my understanding is that they're also starting to produce their own cement locally. As you could guess, local production of these materials is much more cost-effective than -- instead of trying to bring it in.

But you're absolutely correct that the batch-plant capabilities exist. Having flown to different locations and seen some of the road construction, they are on top of it, in terms of the materials being close by to the construction sites.

Q Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you so much --

COL. WEHR: You did ask about the -- Chuck, you had a second part to your question --

Q Well, I --

COL. WEHR: -- or perhaps the third part of --

Q Yeah, I was sort of headed into -- with the Afghan military, are we going to be giving them batch plants, bulldozers, graters, bridging units, things like that, as part of their --

COL. WEHR: There are some --

Q Yeah, go ahead. COL. WEHR: Some of those items are -- some of those items are, in fact, part of the -- what we call a (task kill ?), or a table of equipment that they will receive. It is a limited amount of horizontal- and vertical-type equipment -- of course, horizontal being the earthmoving, the dozers and graders you mentioned; the vertical being the tools, electrical, plumbing, things like that.

We have called our units in the United States "Combat Heavies" that do this type of instruction. And there will be a Combat Heavy or a construction type battalion at each corps that will have that capability.

In terms of the perhaps more robust activities, like batch plants or even asphalt, my understanding is there's no intention of having that skill set within their list of missions. Even in our own -- the United States we have -- of course, it's a trade-off, but we do not have that necessarily in our own units. It really does rely, of course, upon the capabilities that exist within the nation, on the economy, perhaps, as I would call it.

Again, just to clarify it, there is no plan currently for batch plants or asphalt.

Q Thank you.

COL. WEHR: Sure, Chuck. No problem.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir.

And thank you, Chuck.

Okay, Joe, it's your turn. Please go ahead.

Q Hello, Colonel. It's a pleasure to have you --

COL. WEHR: Yes, Joe.

Q Yep.

My question actually -- excuse me about that, my question has to do with the future role that you are working toward with the Afghan engineers. Do you see them playing a role in their country similar to the USA's Army Corps of Engineers, which would include civilian construction projects that are fairly extensive? Or is it envisioned as a more limited, sort of, service provider to Afghanistan's military role?

COL. WEHR: Joe, that is a -- I really appreciate that question.

I had just finished serving about three years with the Corps of Engineers prior to this job. And they have, of course, are in this country right now. The Corps of Engineers has two districts. It's called the Afghan Engineer District North, here in Kabul; and then down in Kandahar, which is Afghan Engineer District South.

The Corps of Engineers, as I mentioned earlier, is executing the majority of our construction. And I myself learned, when I look and think of our own chief of engineers, Lt. General Van Antwerp who wears basically three hats -- whether it be the military troop, regimental side; or the construction side, which is traditional -- I think the Corps, as you're referring to it now, and what they're in this country; and, of course the third hat being on the Army staff.

But the answer is, the current engineering capability at the ministerial level is only wearing one of those hats, and that's just very lightly. I mean, the fact is, they are learning how to manage construction; how to have a budget; how to develop a master plan for facilities. So they have a significant role that they'll be playing as we transition facilities into their control.

That is a very specific mission that -- we're using an organization called "ITAG," and that's the Infrastructure Training and Advisory Group, which we count about 60 folks. We are just starting it now, and they are training the ministerial facility engineers on those types of skills. They have historically had a military role, but they do not have that now. Of course, the actual engineers within the ranks are very few and limited, so that clearly makes sense at this point.

I think in the future they may have that role as they mature. It may not reside in just a brigadier general; it could be a major general. So that will be into the future. So they certainly do have a role that is looking at that right now, in terms of infrastructure, and we are working with them as we build across their nation.

Q So when you say "the future," how many -- I mean, how many years into the future would we be talking before they really go beyond just, sort of, building facilities for the military?

COL. WEHR: 2013 is our benchmark for transitioning. Essentially, the ITAG mission is to ensure that the Afghan facility engineers are capable of maintaining their own facilities and doing some master planning. So 2013 is our target. I know that there will be a continued presence in a security assistance role further beyond 2013.

We certainly want to make sure the investment in infrastructure is held up and not allowed to deteriorate. We challenge ourselves, even in our own country, to invest and maintain infrastructure, and we certainly want to make sure that the Afghans have got the best processes forward for sustaining what has been provided. As you may be aware, we have certainly spent billions of dollars in this infrastructure, and our investment in ensuring that it's maintained is critical. Q Yep.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you so much, sir.

And thank you, Joe.

We have time to quickly go around the (horn ?). I just want to make sure if there's any other questions.

John, go ahead. Q Yes, John Doyle, 4Gwar Blog again,  
Colonel --

COL. WEHR: Yes, John.

Q -- (inaudible) -- before I put my mute button on during your answer, because there was a lot of noise here and I couldn't -- answer that -- you had answered my question, and I thank you for it.

Anyway, we've been talking a lot about construction, and I'm just wondering, the plans to -- for this engineering program for the Afghan national army and the engineering school, will that include any kind of SAPR training? Will they be trained in demolition, and IED -- taking care of IEDs, and removing bombs as well as building buildings, or is that apples and oranges?

COL. WEHR: No, I think you're very much on track there. The SAPR skills, the route clearance companies, specifically, are really the focus of the engineer schoolhouse at the moment. The facilities will probably -- well, in fact, it will be on a parallel track, to include training civilians as well.

But to get to your question, the engineer schoolhouse will be focused on SAPR skills. It'll be focused specifically on route clearance and mobility. And minimal force protection: There are pieces of equipment -- loaders, dozers, and earthmoving equipment like that that will allow them to create their own forward operating bases. The schoolhouse is, in fact, nested -- or, in fact, it's one and the same with the EOD schoolhouse.

And this is really a great initiative, perhaps even beyond where we are in the United States, of combining those two schoolhouses for the threat that they face. So, again, the SAPR skills and the route clearance companies will get after that mission (begin?).

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir.

Thank you, John.

Chuck? Q Yes.

Colonel, how many engineers do you anticipate the final Afghan army to have? I know we're headed toward something like 180,000 troops. So how big an engineering corps are we going to have?

COL. WEHR: Chuck, I will have to get back with you on the exact numbers.

But what I can tell you is that each brigade has an engineer company, and that includes route clearance. The infantry battalions do not have an engineer element, in terms of a SAPR platoon, perhaps like our own United States model. So they are nested throughout the ranks, starting at the brigade level and the corps level, and they have, again, the horizontal-vertical type mission the higher up they are in the rank

structure or the task organization, and, again, more focused on SAPR skills at the brigade and below.

So I will get back with you on the number. We certainly have that. We have a map that plans out the exact numbers to ensure we've got adequate training facilities for the engineers that will be coming through.

Q Great. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: And lastly, before you wrap up, Joe, any final questions?

Q A couple, actually.

One is, I was wondering if the Colonel -- you had mentioned that sometimes doing the shuras have led you to solutions that were different from what you had originally envisaged. I was wondering if you could give a concrete example of that?

COL. WEHR: Certainly. Absolutely.

As we form and field the forces, there is a lot of movement of those units. We'll build facilities and then, because of the operations under way within the COIN environment, there will be facilities that are not needed by the original unit. So through the shura process we'll identify solutions for that.

And a few things that really have struck me with our facilities shuras, as you can imagine when you're trying to build within the COIN environment, you have to secure holds and builds. And that build phase really does not apply to engineers, per se; it applies to building governance. And while you're holding, we are trying to build, literally, facilities.

So we will not always have the security that we need, and this facility shura has allowed us, for example, Lieutenant General Karimi -- and this, you know, we don't maneuver forces within the NTM-A/CSTC- A mission. We provide the forces that are integrated into the regional commands. But by asking for security through the G-3, he was enabling us to focus, where we needed security, to get after the most important facilities that would allow the eventual governance to follow, whether it be police stations or army facilities.

So that is one example of kind of an unexpected assistance that came from the G-3. There's no way the engineer within the ANA, again, Brigadier General Habibullah, would have those type of forces at his disposal. So that was a -- that was a key help.

Another example is, within Kabul, if you can imagine, a very condensed, limited space; facilities -- whether they be tents, connexes or enduring, are very limited. And we are trying to grow the army and the police at the same time we're trying to train. So we have facilities

that, in fact, are housing units that are just starting before they go into training.

One initiative, which is very essential and critical for General Caldwell is literacy. So while we have focused on the building facilities for specific purposes, through the shura process we have been able to say, look, we would like to have classes now instead of housing units. And that has been welcomed at the facilities shura level. So essentially we're redefining what we're using some of the buildings for.

And literacy is a critical one. It enables us to build a much stronger and enduring force. And, again, if I could just put my engineer hat back on, educated engineers will, in fact, maintain facilities much better. But that's just a sidebar. The facilities shura has provided those two things -- the ability to provide security at locations that they're needed, and the ability to reutilize or redefine the purpose of the facilities.

So does that get after your question, Joe?

Q Kind of. Well, yeah, we'll call it done.

LT. CRAGG: And also, Joe, if you have follow-on questions, please feel free to forward them my way, and I'll make sure I send them to Major Vanessa Hillman. Is that okay with you?

Q Perfect.

LT. CRAGG: Okay.

And then it goes for John and Chuck as well. After you get the transcript, if you have any follow-on questions, please feel free to send them my way as well.

With that, I'd like to turn it back over to Colonel Wehr.

If you'd like to -- and with any closing thoughts for today, and we'll wrap up today's Roundtable. The floor is yours again COL. WEHR: Okay, Lieutenant Cragg.

And John and Chuck and Joe, I really do appreciate your questions. Again, the chance to share information has been very important for me. I'll be reading the blog, of course, that each of you may be creating.

We are really looking forward and trying to lean forward on the perceptions of the engineer effort.

We are under certainly a lot of scrutiny. As I had mentioned, we spend a lot of money -- billions of dollars, and we want to do it correctly. And I believe, within our COIN environment, we're doing very well at that.

There are huge success stories out there, in terms of Afghan engineer solutions, whether it be, literally, alternative energy, with windmills; or better utilizing water towers, as opposed to having electrical pump-provide pressure. There are some great initiatives out there that are under way. And the more we learn from the Afghans on how to build an enduring-type of facility, the better we are.

We have stumbled initially, perhaps, with over-engineered buildings that are hard to maintain in an environment that does not have predictable power. But by simplifying and coming up with Afghan solutions, whether it be Afghan (builds ?) or Afghan designed, has really going a long way.

So in closing, I would just say that in terms of teaming, the mentoring at the highest level is critical. It really does improve the transition prospects as we look forward. And, of course, being transparent in our processes. There are certainly tough decisions on whether to build a temporary facility or a more enduring facility. Currently, we are certainly basing, or building where we're fighting. And that is a challenge in any environment.

We're also certainly partnering, in terms of getting after the potential corruption in the construction, we have a non-governmental agency, or NGO called "Integrity Watch" that we'll be working with. We've already had some discussions. The Corps of Engineers has got a great initiative, in terms of building their (bench ?) with contractors that are better skilled and trained to handle larger and larger construction. So we are really trying to invest in the integrity of the process within Afghanistan. So that's part of our transparency.

And, of course, we're all leaning forward on the transition. We wanted to create that self-sustaining Afghan force that is capable of maintaining their own facilities. And we're enabling and teaching Afghans to take on that responsibility. It is really essential that they've got that skill. So, again, on behalf of General Caldwell, thanks again for allowing me to explain the engineer effort here for the command as we continue to build the Afghan capacity to ensure their own security. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you so much, sir.

With that, I just want to do a quick admin note for everyone. Again, as I said, in the beginning, we will load up the transcript from today's call on [www.DoDLive.mil](http://www.DoDLive.mil). Just click on the Bloggers Roundtable and you'll find a post from today's discussion. We also include the podcast as well as the story that will be featured on [defense.gov](http://defense.gov).

Again, thank you so much, sir.

You've been listening to U.S. Army Colonel Mike Wehr, Director of Combined Joint Engineering Office, NATO Training Mission, Afghanistan; Combined Security Transition Command, Afghanistan.

Thank you so much, sir.

And thank you for everyone that called in. This ends today's Roundtable. Please feel free to disconnect at any time.

END.