

THE AFGHAN MISSION

Afghans, troops pave way to safer road

Work being done on route by locals could mean difference between life and death for Canadian soldiers

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BAZAR-E-PANJWAI, AFGHANISTAN -- Road construction at this time of year is a fact of life around the world, including war-torn Afghanistan.

However, work being currently done by a small army of Afghans on a key dirt road that snakes through the Panjwai district could mean the difference between life and death for Canadian soldiers deployed to the volatile area.

In many respects, the front line in the war in Afghanistan is on its dirt roads because Taliban insurgents use them to hide improvised explosive devices. The majority of the 84 Canadians killed in the conflict died in roadside bomb attacks.

"First and foremost, this will give soldiers more freedom of movement," said Captain Guy Dumont, a Canadian soldier helping to supervise the major road-construction project. "It's not hard right now to blow one up."

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The military has hired about 320 Afghan men, mainly from the Panjwai district, a region where unemployment is rampant, to construct and pave the road - a move that will make it harder for the Taliban to hide bombs. More workers are expected to be hired after the poppy harvest finishes later this month.

However, getting locals safely to the construction site and protecting them while they are there has been half the battle.

Capt. Dumont said some of them have been targeted by Taliban insurgents, and security is a daily major concern. At least one worker was shot on his way to work earlier this year. The Canadian military paid for his medical bills.

On April 12, the heavily guarded construction work site, which is located about 40 kilometres southwest of Kandahar, was hit by a rocket.

There's also been a problem with violence breaking out between workers. Some have gotten into fights, once even over a bet about a sandwich.

The project, which started in February, has been painstakingly slow because most of the back-breaking work has been done by hand in 40-degree weather and the majority of men had to be trained on the job.

While the Afghans have been issued gloves and reflective belts, they refuse to wear construction boots and helmets.

All the construction materials have to be trucked in from Kandahar Airfield. A hard-to-find cold pavement that had to be ordered from South Africa has yet to arrive. The paving, which has to be done with shovels, is expected to start early next month.

The first stage of the project is expected to cost \$4.5-million, and pay for 6.5 kilometres of road to be paved. So far, only about 700 metres have been prepared.

Capt. Dumont said the Canadian government, which is paying for the project, could have done the work itself a lot faster, but would have missed out on the opportunity of employing so many Afghans and boosting the local economy.

He added the Canadian government also wanted it to be built by local Afghans because in the long run the road is for them.

The military hired a local Afghan to recruit workers. While one of the goals is to hire young jobless men who are at risk of being recruited by the Taliban, their workers range in age from 13 to 92. The military has had to turn away boys as young as 10 who want to work on the road.

Workers receive about 300 Afghanis a day, the equivalent of \$6, which is the average wage for a local general labourer. About 95 per cent are illiterate so the military uses a fingerprint system for workers to pick up their paycheque every Thursday.

Each Afghan carries a photo identification security card that lists his name, height, weight and even the tribe he belongs to. They are searched every morning before entering the work site, which is under the constant watch of Canadian soldiers.

Habibullah Muhammad is one of the oldest workers. The 80-year-old said six of his seven sons are dead - all killed in fighting over the years - and he had to go back to work to support his 14 family members. His remaining son is 10 years old.

"This money is for my family so we can eat and buy clothes," he said. Like many of the other older workers, he's assigned to traffic control.

All workers are provided water and lunch, a selection of rice, bread and meat. They are also given time to pray in a roadside mosque, which is effectively a small compound with walls that are built to knee level.

Before they leave for the day, workers can visit a military medic. Most line up to get aspirin or face moisturizer. However, some complain about

Before they leave for the day, workers can visit a military medic. Most line up to get aspirin or pain reliever. However, some complain about long-term ailments and dental problems.

Sergeant Adam Bell is in charge of four work crews totalling 100 men.

"This is very rewarding. I'm actually outside of the wire doing something that will be here for a long time," said Sgt. Bell, an Edmonton-based soldier.

While the project has several interpreters, Sgt. Bell has learned several Pashto phrases such as "How are you?" and "It's quitting time" so he can speak with his workers.

"We are not building the road, they are," he said.