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Opinion

To better Afghanistan, boot the contractors

Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai wants private security contractors out of the country. He should go even further, by kicking out *all* development contractors. Their record of fraud and waste is reason enough. They also undermine NGOs truly helping the Afghan people.

By Josef Storm, Malou Innocent / September 23, 2010

Washington

Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai recently issued a controversial edict aimed at removing all private security contractors from Afghanistan this fall. Given the mounting evidence of corruption and wrongdoing by US contractors attached to the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the government's main distributor of development contracts, Mr. Karzai for once did the right thing. In fact, he should broaden his edict and remove *all* development contractors from his country.

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Development contracting is government-sponsored stabilization and reconstruction efforts outsourced to private contractors. But from dilapidated schools and unfurnished buildings to billions of dollars charged for projects abandoned before completion, the massive fraud and waste endemic to development contracting in Afghanistan does more than leave American taxpayers ripped off and battered Afghans disappointed. It

undermines the efforts of those trying to make a difference: privately-funded humanitarian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Unfinished projects

Federal prosecutors are investigating US-funded development contractor Louis Berger Group over claims that it submitted inflated invoices to USAID. With the group now managing more than \$1.4 billion worth of USAID-funded contracts in Afghanistan, the potential for malfeasance is vast.

Criminal and civil investigations into Louis Berger Group follow an expose in The Christian Science Monitor about a failed \$60 million USAID-funded project with PADCO, another development contractor, to provide electricity capacity in Afghanistan. One Afghan engineer familiar with the project summarized, "Fifty percent they didn't do. They just dug this ... and left." The electricity chief for Badakhshan Province was just as upset: "Now the people are hating American companies like PADCO because many times they brought millions of dollars, but didn't do anything."

Scam artists

Contracting problems go beyond inflating costs or leaving projects unfinished. Christopher Shays, a former Republican congressman from Connecticut who is co-chair of the Commission on Wartime Contracting, said his team is looking into cases of contractors, or what he called "outright scam artists," charging foreign laborers to fly them to supposed jobs in Dubai. But instead, contractors dump laborers on air bases in Afghanistan with no job, no identification, and no way home. "The bigger problem," said one official quoted in the Washington Examiner,

"is that we don't know who they are but they are inside our installations.... This presents a security risk."

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