



## Afghanistan's First Railroad Aims to Undermine Taliban Funding

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By Dave McCombs

Oct. 28 (Bloomberg) -- Afghanistan is building its first rail link with the help of the Asian Development Bank in a bid to improve trade and aid and undermine highway bandits helping to fund insurgents, including the Taliban.

The bank will name the design and operation contractors next week for the **\$170 million railway** from Uzbekistan's border to Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan's second-largest city and a hub for aid and imports, said Juan Miranda, ADB director-general for Central and West Asia. Work on the 75-kilometer (47-mile) line will start this year and may finish in 2010, he said.

Afghanistan has only 25 kilometers of train track and crime gangs along the highways extort cash and steal cargo from haulers. Human rights campaigners and U.S. government officials say the bandits are helping fuel an insurgency that prompted President **Barack Obama** to send 21,000 additional soldiers to the country this year and to consider committing more U.S. troops.

"It's a project that will be transformational," Miranda said by phone from the Philippines capital, Manila. "A railway is a visible sign of progress and it will really help with the trade bottleneck at the border. It's a sign of hope, rather than desperation."

U.S. General **Stanley McChrystal**, the commander of U.S. and NATO-led forces in Afghanistan, wrote in an **August assessment** requesting more troops that insurgent taxes imposed on the "local population through check points" would enable anti-government forces to fund operations, even if profit from the opium trade was eliminated.

For more than a century, every attempt to build a rail network has failed as French, German, Indian, Iranian and Soviet rail plans were abandoned or never broke ground, leaving the landlocked nation without an all-weather transport backbone.

### Cutting off Bandits

"A rail line would help by cutting off the source of funds for some of the organized crime groups, because they would not be able to stop the train," said Ahmad Nader Naderi, a member of the Kabul-based **Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission**.

Afghanistan's reliance on trucks facilitates "informal payments" such as extortion that inflate shipping costs by 50 percent in the region, according to a 2006 World Bank study. The International Monetary Fund in 2007 **estimated** shipping costs and delays in Afghanistan are double the regional average.

"Projects like this railway would bring hope for a better future," said Nader Naderi, whose commission investigates human rights abuses.

### Aid Bottleneck

In February, 1,500 metric tons of Russian-donated flour packed onto 25 rail cars arrived at Haryaton, where the Uzbekistan railway line ends, Russia's state-run **RIA Novosti news agency** reported. The cargo took days to shift onto trucks and weeks to deliver, allowing more spoilage, theft and extortion.

Almost half of Afghanistan's imports and even more of its humanitarian aid now come through Haryaton to Mazar-e-Sharif, 290 kilometers north of the capital, Kabul.

Local governors have been accused of extorting payments from truck drivers, undermining support for President **Hamid Karzai's** central government, Nader Naderi said.

Deteriorating road security is also thwarting the U.S. military. In June 2008 alone, 44 trucks and 220,000 gallons (832,790 liters) of fuel were lost because of hijackings and attacks while delivering fuel to Bagram air field near Kabul, the U.S. Government Accountability Office said in a **March 2009 report**.

While the ADB is financing 97 percent of estimated costs through a \$165 million grant, Afghanistan will contribute \$5 million. The rail construction contract has been awarded to **Uzbekistan Temir Yollari**, the Uzbek national railway company.

#### ADB Investment

The ADB expects to invest about a billion dollars in Afghanistan over the next five years, Miranda said.

The paving of a 3,000-kilometer ring road through Kabul, Herat and Kandahar, started six years ago, has yet to be completed as the December 2009 target approaches. Taliban attacks on workers and traffic have delayed construction, **Richard Boucher**, assistant U.S. secretary of state, said last November.

Attempts to create an Afghan railroad began in the 1920s when two German locomotives were used on a 7-kilometer line from Kabul. When King Amanullah Khan, who ordered them, was overthrown, the project was abandoned. The engines now sit rusting among weeds in an outdoor museum, said Andrew Grantham, news editor of Railway Gazette International magazine and author of a **Web site** on the history of rail projects in Afghanistan.

Three locomotives imported from Germany in the 1950s to supply a power station east of Kabul vanished, their fate unknown, said Grantham, who also said he thinks the ADB-financed railway will be built.

#### Similar Fate

The current rail project may meet a similar fate, given the lack of security, said Malou Innocent, a foreign policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a Washington research organization. Aid projects pay a percentage to the Taliban for protection, though that may not prevent attacks, she said in an e-mailed comment.

"Unless enough U.S., NATO, and Afghan troops are prepared to defend the new railway network indefinitely, we could see all of this infrastructure destroyed almost as quickly as we build it," said Innocent, co-author of the report: "**Escaping the Graveyard of Empires: A Strategy to Exit Afghanistan.**"

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