



## U.S. Reconstruction Failing in Afghanistan

January 12, 2013

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Washington, D.C. - At \$28 million dollars a day, the United States has spent more money rebuilding Afghanistan than it has revamping any other nation, John Sopko, special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, told an audience of 60 Thursday at the the Henry L. Stimson Center.

“We are at a risk now of wasting billions of dollars,” he said, “if the agencies charged with implementing new programs and constructing new facilities do not first answer some basic questions.”

Sopko said his comments were aimed at agencies working in the South Asian country, but not one in particular.

As of March, U.S. spending on Afghan humanitarian and reconstruction aid had accrued to nearly \$90 billion dollars, according to the SIGAR’s website. Sopko’s office conducts audits and investigations to ensure projects are done well and that money was not misused.

Last month’s audit revealed \$12 million in Department of Defense equipment was sitting idly in a storage facility and that the U.S. Agency for International Development paid a contractor for work that wasn’t done. Hundreds of pages of audits, dating to 2009, detail project successes and failures.

Halfway through his talk, Sopko described one of the “worst examples” of reconstruction lapses.

A multimillion-dollar program intended to protect highway pipes from being made into bombs, also known as improvised explosive devices, wasn’t effective because quality control procedures were not followed.

“They failed to prevent IEDs from being put underneath the highway, and may have resulted in the death of U.S., coalition and Afghan forces,” Sopko said.

His talk comes a week after the military recommended that 6,000 to 20,000 American soldiers stay in Afghanistan post-2014, the withdrawal date for remaining combat troops.

The White House is considering a “zero option,” meaning all soldiers would leave, if the U.S. can’t reach an agreement with the Afghanistan government.

In addition to the corruption, inadequate planning and poor security that Sopko blamed as root causes, project management is diluted as it passes through the hands of one contractor to another, Malou Innocent, Cato Institute foreign policy analyst, said.

“The costs of operating in Afghanistan are extremely high, and so they end up subcontracting to local authorities who then subcontract out to other local authorities,” she said. “The mechanisms set up are almost doomed to failure, especially in the context of the country they’re operating in.”

With 206 recommendations for suspension and debarment of contractors or institutions since his office was created in 2008, Sopko said his team has been the most aggressive in the inspector general community.

“Unfortunately, not every agency in the U.S. government has the same fire in the belly,” he said. “Many times, when we refer companies or individuals for suspension and debarment, those referrals are not acted on as expeditiously and as quickly as we want.”

Until the federal government supplements auditing with a more effective approach of clamping down on corruption and disbarring ineffective or corrupt contractors, Innocent said no significant changes can occur.

“We have proposed granting SIGAR or the theater commanders independent suspension and debarment authority,” Sopko said. “That could allow us to get rid of bad actors as soon as we find them.”