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Warnings on flawed Kajaki dam mission ignored: Report

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A giant additional hydroelectric turbine on the Kajaki dam, the most costly development projects since 2001, remains offline, eight years after a contract on its installation was signed and five years later 200 insurgents were killed during the British military-led operation to deliver it, a report said on Thursday.

Based on interviews with British and American officials, the research by Noah Arjomand of the Afghan Analysts Network, a Kabul-based independent policy search organisation, found the UK took on one of the biggest operations of the war in Afghanistan, Operation Eagle's Nest, to redeem itself after failures in Iraq by transporting the turbine through hostile territory in a largely symbolic act.

It said the Operation Eagle's Nest was conducted for the benefit of the British military and USAID, the organisations that championed the project.

“Over time, Turbine-Two became a way for both the American aid agency and the British military to show their mettle to a dominant US Department of Defense,” the report said, adding the turbine thus took on significance beyond the actual 1.5 megawatts of electricity that it was to provide, especially bearing in mind that this would, in fact, put only a small dent in the ever-increasing demand for electricity from southern Afghanistan's cities.”

It concluded British officers and American aid officials ignored warnings that the mission to Kajaki dam, in southern Helmand province, was flawed and that power lines from the hydroelectric plant had yet to be repaired.

For the British military, the report said, the operation offered “redemption” after being forced out of Basra in 2007 and consumed enormous military resources at a time when British forces were already spread thin in Helmand.

A convoy of 100 vehicles moved seven 20 to 30-ton turbine sections from Kandahar airfield to the dam, with aid officials hoping the turbine would produce power for thousands of families, winning them over to the government in Kabul.

But it was never installed. Chinese contractors pulled out, citing lack of security, and forces were unable to secure the road to Kajaki for delivery of cement and gravel.