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## Barracks and Burger King: U.S. Builds a Supersized Base in Afghanistan

8/6/2009

BAGRAM AIR BASE, Afghanistan -- Anyone who thinks the Afghanistan troop "surge" is a temporary, one-time deal should watch the construction here of a vast new \$17 million barracks building.

It's not temporary. It's three stories of concrete.

Eight years after American forces scattered the Taliban and effectively conquered Afghanistan, the United States is embarked on a frenzied \$220 million building campaign at this sprawling and still expanding military air base. Just to meet the base's demand for fresh concrete, it has two of its own cement factories working full time.

There's plenty of guessing these days about whether Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the top commander in Afghanistan, will recommend a large troop increase here, and if so, how many, and if he does, whether President Obama will agree. But perhaps the construction of the new troop barracks, and permanent new facilities such as water treatment plants, headquarters buildings, fuel farms and power generating plants says more about the size and duration of this war than any White House press conference or Pentagon power-point presentation.

When I first visited this war-battered former Soviet base in January 2002, the military was erecting canvas tents for incoming troops. Infantrymen of the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division were hammering together plywood outhouses; hot showers were a cruel rumor, and the few buildings left intact from the Mujaheddin war with the Russians were getting a cursory remodeling (i.e., windows).

"Low profile" was the directive coming down from Washington, senior officers told me then. That meant no big construction. Wartime living conditions. Nothing could be built that

couldn't be turned over to and used by the Afghans themselves in a year or two, they vowed. Mornings, we shaved outdoors.

Well, that was then.

Today, Bagram sports a Burger King and Pizza Hut, five mess halls, and living quarters for 20,000 people (so far), office spaces for the command, Joint Task Force-82, and for dozens of other headquarters and agencies. A well-stocked PX sells everything from potato chips to vacuum cleaners.

Russian minefields on the south and east sides of the long runway have been cleared for freight yards, aircraft aprons, bulk fuel storage, hangars and maintenance sheds. New logistics warehouses bake in the sun amid acres of parked armored vehicles. A network of new roads connecting it all is jammed with dusty SUVs, fuel and water tankers, troop buses, cement mixers, dump trucks full of crushed rock and tractor-trailers piled with steel girders and concrete pipe.

Bagram's air facilities, its supersized runway, parking aprons, cargo handling machines and maintenance bays are sized for the stream of intercontinental and local cargo aircraft, aeromedical evacuation planes, bombers, strike fighters, unmanned drone aircraft and cargo and attack helicopters that roar in and out of here day and night.

Although all this would presumably belong to the Afghans, should the U.S. someday pull out, it's hard to see how this air base could be used efficiently by Afghanistan alone. Its civilian air hub, Kabul International, is barely 40 miles away. And Afghanistan's air force of seven medium cargo planes and 13 helicopters would be dwarfed here.

Still, the work continues. Long dust plumes mark where armored bulldozers are plowing up old minefields. Behind them come earth movers leveling off small hills. Gangs of turbaned Afghans lay steel pipe in deep, newly dug trenches. Lines of cement mixers stand ready to pour.

"The whole landscape is changing rapidly – every time I come out here it's something new," Army Capt. Scot R. Keith, a staff officer, told me on a drive around the base.

I recently had a lengthy conversation about Afghanistan's future with Army Col. Scott Spellmon. This combat-decorated counterinsurgency expert, finishing up a 15-month tour here as a brigade commander, said he thinks that in northeast Afghanistan, at least, American involvement will become less military, more civilian. As security improves, with forces hunting down the last pockets of insurgents and Afghan army units and police improving, the work can shift more toward development.

He already sees signs that this is happening, he said, with Afghans taking over security completely in some large areas and the State Department sending out civilian reinforcements. That's the plan for the rest of Afghanistan, too. Just don't look for it to happen anytime soon. The concrete suggests otherwise.