

Diary Entry 1

The following diary entries are Ron Hamilton's personal observations, musings and thoughts while commissioned by World Bank to review governance and monitoring in the SOE sector in Kabul during 2009.

4 May 2009

“The mud of one country is the medicine of another.” (Afghan proverb)

I am in Kabul. Singapore Airlines and KAM Air delivered me to Kabul Airport this morning. I went from having a magnificent view of rural Afghanistan from about 30 000 feet to a bumpy landing outside an aging and an incomplete terminal building. On finals, I could see the city to my left with, in the middle foreground, a large walled enclosure which housed aged military vehicles. I assumed they were Russian.

Our aircraft was parked to one side. It was only later that I discovered it was to let the President's aircraft depart from our parking space. The President was off to meet President Obama. Inside the dimly lit baggage hall, all hell had broken loose as Afghans and foreigners tried to find their bags in the overcrowded carousel and in large piles of previously delivered baggage. In my usual pessimistic attitude, I commenced wondering how I would report my missing bag, last seen in Denpasar Airport. But lo! It appeared! All Blacks supporters stickers making it stand out!

Another mild internalised panic over there not being anyone to meet me. In the end, I wandered across a muddy forecourt to a large car park and spotted a man waving a notice with my name on it. It transpired that the President's departure required all roads to the airport to be closed to traffic. My guide led me a kilometre – through a downpour - and along a broken concrete road where, next to the shell of some kind of jet aircraft on a plinth, our car and driver were waiting.

It is probably timely to mention that I am in Kabul at the request of the World Bank and their client, the IMF. My task is to provide advice on how to strengthen the monitoring of SOEs, with particular emphasis on four State owned corporations.

Our car is a large Toyota SUV. I discovered later that all the Bank's cars are armoured.

The traffic was still recovering from the President's departure. Both sides of the road are at a near stand-still. It was impressive to see, interspersed in the dense traffic, armoured Humvees – each with a manned machine-gun on the top. I guess we passed about 40 of these fascinating but daunting machines in the short trip to the Bank's compound. We also passed many heavily armed Afghan Police and army personnel. In their uniforms, not always easy to distinguish which service they were in. Intersections and roundabouts were protected by sand-bagged machine-gun nests. To be fair to Kabul, such sights can and have been seen in other capitals. Colombo came immediately to mind.

I am now sitting in my home for the next three weeks. A front-facing bedroom on the second level of Guest House Two. Outside my window I can see a steep and sharp-peaked mini-mountain, the summit covered in all kinds of communications antenna and house clinging to the steep slope. I am still coming to grips that, finally, I am in Kabul, Afghanistan!

I had my first meeting with the Minister this afternoon. I get a desk in the Ministry of Finance tomorrow. In the evening, I take secret lessons on walking on water, such as I have been sold to the Ministry officials! Tomorrow, I am to ask the Ministry where their safe room is - they couldn't answer John (my team leader) today. I do wonder why officials would tell us about their safe rooms – if I were them, any secure space would be for me and mine before a bunch of foreign rent-seekers!

As I have already mentioned, it was fascinating drive – first to the Bank's compound, and then to the Ministry. Not fare to compare one city with another but it is a sum of many Middle-East/South Asian cities. Bad roads, traffic jams, dirt, rubble and rebuilding. The armoured vehicles we will be travelling in have tinted windows and so, photography will be severely limited. Sight-seeing is very unlikely.

I have just had my security briefing and all the things I have to remember! There is a hierarchy of threatened organisations and the World Bank is not really on the list. However, criminals are an issue -as they are anywhere - and that is why we use armoured vehicles. Like Jo's and Steve's "truck" but with plating inside the body. Cheap "rice-burners" are likely to bounce off them. However, the Bank issues visitors with cell phone and a two way radio. This last is in case the cell phone system crashes and I need to tell the Bank where I am, if away from the compound. John points out that the radio will be of little use – when he was in Baghdad the radios choked with incomprehensive callers whenever there was an explosion.

Already I am confused over some of the instructions. Does "white city" being texted to my cell phone mean I simply have to report in? Or is that "yellow city"? One of them simply requires my reporting in; the other requires recipients to head to the lowest, internal part of any building we happen to be in.

As I write this, Leith will be sleeping the sleep of the ADB-exhausted back in distant Bali and will have planned how she will wake in the morning. In spite of John's assurance, my personal cell phone will not connect.

I am a bit knackered and I really should do some work to adjust to the hours. Sadly, no booze in the guest house fridge. I had thought of buying some but didn't want to cause a fuss at the airport. Just missed a call on my new second-hand phone. My meeting for tomorrow has changed.

Hard to do justice to the sights from the back of a closed car. So I will close off until tomorrow.