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AFPAK Hands have strategic effects

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KABUL, Afghanistan - When Lt. Col. Rob Rabb joined the Afghanistan/Pakistan (AFPAK) Hands program he never dreamed that he would become a speech writer or that his letters would land on the desk of Afghan President Hamid Karzai for signature.

"You can imagine my surprise when I realized that my proposal for a project was diverted from the minister, for whom I thought I was writing it, to the president of Afghanistan," said Rabb, with a look of amazement on his face, while sitting at Camp Julien, the home of the Counter-Insurgency Training Academy, attended by coalition forces and Afghan National Army soldiers.

As a mechanical engineer, Rabb brings a special set of skills to the AFPAK Hands program by working in a cluster of four business ministries called the Agriculture, Reconstruction, and Development cluster.

"We have embedded partners there (ministries) and our job is to go over there and not get stuck in their battle rhythm, but really to work at the higher level to integrate the ministries, have them work better internally and externally," explained Rabb, referring to effective communication between the Afghan government and external partners such as international aid agencies, non government agencies, and coalition forces.

"For example, there is a plan for a large scale hydroelectric project that will require quadrupling the capacity of the facility," said Rabb, adding that the power generated would then be run it down to one of the major cities.

"This is a huge effort. It will take 100M to work on the dam and 200M to work on the transmission lines, but it's all necessary because right now a lot of places in Afghanistan are being generated by diesel fuel. The diesel generators are running them 100M per year, which is unsustainable and they can't afford to run them once we leave," he continued.

With his professional engineering skills, the ability to speak conversational Dari, coupled with the knowledge of Afghan customs and traditions, Rabb is able to advise the Afghan ministers on how to plan and prioritize to successfully construct the hydroelectric plant located in a remote area with a strong insurgent foothold.

“For instance, recently I have been asked to look at the national priority program energy plan for the next three years and it is basically an outline, a very long 120 pages outline, with additional annexes,” he said, with a slightly bewildered look on his face. “I am looking at that program with their engineers to lay out their priorities, their funding, and their plans ... I try to relate (information) back to the international community, assisting them (Afghans) to where they can seek additional funding based off of their priorities.”

Dressed in a sharp suit, a typical working day for Rabb consists of departing the International Security Afghanistan Force (ISAF) headquarters early in the morning, driving down “ministry row,” where most of the important governmental buildings are located, and beginning his day with a series of meetings, drinking chai and chatting with people in Dari, from office to office, conducting business Afghan style until about 4 pm.

“I normally come back to ISAF and continue my working day, which consists of reading and responding to emails until late in the evening,” he said.

One of the projects that Rabb is particularly proud of is the ministerial travel program which involves getting the deputy Afghan ministers out to the provinces and districts to talk with local government and tribal leaders.

“Getting the ministers out there where they can talk to the local people and connect the local government to the higher government in Kabul I think is important,” said Rabb, explaining that communicating to the wider public is challenging because of the lack of media, or lack of resources for people to even purchase electronics to remain informed.

“It (travel) gives some credibility to the Afghan government because right now in lots of places it is very disconnected with the local villages. What we are really looking at is connecting with the local leadership who have tribal affiliations, and talking about resources and ways to help them. And the Afghan government has resources,” he said.

“We (AFPAK Hands) do have far reaching abilities and can influence a few things. We do have strategic effects,” concluded Rabb.