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Corps' Operations and Maintenance plan helps Afghans help themselves

KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, Afghanistan — Optimizing a building's operation and maintenance is key to keeping expensive equipment and systems operating efficiently. Building owners and managers have long recognized that reducing the risk of early equipment failure and unscheduled down time helps them manage high utility costs and improve worker productivity.

This O&M fundamental is the reason the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Afghanistan Engineer District-South, in coordination with NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan, CJ-Engineering Infrastructure, Training and Advisory Group, transferred 17 Afghan National Security Forces facilities on Camp Hero from USACE responsibility to the Afghan National Army.

In a ceremony July 7, hosted by the 205th Atal Corps and attended by representatives from the ANA, NTM-A CJ-Engineering ITAG, AED-South and others, the facilities and their O&M officially became the responsibility of the ANA.

"This is a great opportunity for us to do what we set out to do," said Bob Baldwin, AED-South Construction O&M chief. "Not only are we transferring O&M responsibilities to the Afghans, which is imperative as 2014 draws closer, we are also providing them with the training they need to maintain their facilities into the future."

This transfer is the first such transfer of stewardship responsibilities to occur in Afghanistan. "It is a very significant step forward for the ANA. From a practical standpoint, there needed to be enough training, tools, funding, and resources for the Afghan facility engineering staff to maintain the structures," said Maj. Michael Malone, ITAG team leader. "Also, the ANSF staff has the confidence to undertake the responsibility, a symbolic first step and visible throughout the ANA."

Malone further stressed that the successful turnover of stewardship at these Camp Hero facilities is working to silence transition skeptics while concurrently helping the ANSF develop its O&M capacity.

Additionally, the 205th Atal Corps headquarters building is among this first group of facilities turned over to the Afghans, so the 205th commander will see firsthand the value of a trained O&M staff as part of the garrison support unit.

"Developing a public works department at the kandak level engages the commanders and invests them into the success of the O&M mission," said Albert Soliz, AED-South Project Management O&M chief. "We chose the buildings at Camp Hero because they are close to Kandahar Airfield, where AED-South, ITAG and ITT are all located. That proximity gives us a good opportunity to check on the progress of the training."



Afghan facility maintenance workers accept responsibility for the operations and maintenance of 17 ANA facilities on Camp Hero July 7. (Courtesy photo)

USACE awarded a \$350 million O&M contract July 27, 2010, to ITT Corp. for ANSF facilities in southern Afghanistan. The contract has two main functions – to sustain facilities constructed by USACE and provide job training to Afghans for O&M transition.

“Until now, this contract has been primarily about ITT conducting O&M. Now we are channeling our efforts to establish and stand up a totally functional and viable Afghan O&M capability for the ANSF,” said Baldwin.

ITT did train Afghan civilians at Camp Hero in preparation for the turnover of these first 17 buildings, but improvements to the training program are underway. ANSF civilian personnel are learning various O&M procedures such as how to perform quality inspections, carry out safety requirements, process work orders, along with mechanical, electrical, carpentry, masonry, plumbing, painting and other tasks.

Job shadowing and on-the-job training are the most effective training methods, said Malone. ITT’s role in the transition includes sharing its institutional knowledge gained from operating and maintaining the buildings at Camp Hero with the ANSF facility engineers and maintenance workers who have succeeded them.

“An emphasis must be placed on the training and establishment of a professional junior leadership core who will be future leaders in the Afghan facilities career field,” said Soliz.

Overall, Soliz envisions a two-phased, eight-month training period for most workers: four months for the basic training, then two months learning preventative maintenance at specific buildings and on specific equipment, and two months of contractor supervision at those buildings and remedial training, if necessary. After that, the expectation is that the new cadre of Afghan O&M workers will be self-sufficient.

Soliz added that, “This transition absolutely requires training. All of the training is with a specific end state in mind. Afghans are transitioning to more responsibility in all areas as 2014 draws near. Facility maintenance is the piece that AED-South is particularly invested in.”

ITAG, AED-South and ITT Corp. are working together to develop a training and transition plan that is effective and falls within coalition goals for all facilities. “This is an important mission,” said Malone. “The coalition expends a tremendous amount of money operating and maintaining permanent garrisons, such as Camp Hero. By transitioning O&M responsibility to the Afghans, the cost is reduced.”

According to Malone, there are three key fringe benefits of transferring O&M responsibility. He explained that the transition of responsibility counters a culture of dependency created when well-intentioned coalition parties provide expensive turn-key solutions to the ANSF.

Also, the transition fosters a pride in ownership that will ultimately reduce tenant abuse of facilities and corresponding repair costs. Lastly, transition of O&M responsibilities empowers the Afghan chain of command to better support their operational force that is providing security for the country.