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USACE engineer makes a difference in Afghanistan

KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, Afghanistan -- Geographically, it is not far from Islamabad, Pakistan to Kandahar, Afghanistan, but for Ayesha Saeed, a mechanical engineer assigned to the Afghanistan Engineer District-South, making that trip took immigration to the United States when she was 14, naturalization as a U.S. citizen in 2000, a college education and a job with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

“I was born in Pakistan but my family immigrated to the United States in 1993,” said Saeed who works as a project engineer at the South District’s Herat Resident Office. “I always liked math and science, so pursuing a degree in engineering seemed logical to me.”

Saeed is one of four children and the only one to be an engineer. A graduate of Temple University in Philadelphia, she deployed from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Baltimore District and began her tour in Afghanistan in May, 2011.

“When I learned of the opportunity to work in Afghanistan with USACE, I discussed it with my husband and then I volunteered to deploy,” she said. Saeed’s husband Garth Weston, whom she met in college, is a civil engineer from Jamaica and works for the City of Baltimore.

“This is a unique opportunity for me,” she said. “Helping with Afghanistan’s reconstruction effort in building both military and civil works projects, at an accelerated pace and under extreme conditions, has been challenging but really rewarding too.”

Currently, Saeed is working on three projects in Herat province. A utilities upgrade project and a combined support battalion installation project are both on Camp Zafar, an Afghan National Army base adjacent to Camp Stone, the NATO base where Saeed lives. The other project is a regional police training center south of Camp Stone.

“The utilities upgrade project will expand Camp Zafar’s existing utilities capacity to handle ongoing expansion projects. The 207th Corps, the CSB and the 9th Commando Kandak (all battalion-sized garrison complexes on Camp Zafar) will be serviced by the upgraded utilities, which should be finished by May 2012,” said Saeed.

The CSB, a \$27-million project that includes utilities, roads, offices, barracks, dining facilities and storage facilities should be finished in July 2012.



Ayesha Saeed (right), a mechanical engineer at the South District listens as a construction contractor he explains how his company plans to position water pipes in a building’s foundation on Camp Zafar Jan 30. (USACE Photo by Karla Marshall)

The regional police training center, another installation-sized project, located between Adraskan and Shindand Air Base will provide training facilities for more than 3000 troops when complete. The training center is scheduled for completion in May 2013 and will cost about \$57 million.

During her first three months in Afghanistan, Saeed worked in the district headquarters at Kandahar Airfield as a design engineer. She reviewed design requirements for the Afghan National Army, the Afghan National Police and military construction projects that benefit coalition forces.

However, when the opportunity came to work in the field, she jumped at the chance. “My preference is to be a hands-on engineer,” said Saeed. “I want to be on the project sites, inspecting progress and working with the contractors.” As a project engineer, Saeed is responsible for ensuring that contractors build according design specifications and that the USACE building requirements and processes are met.

“Ayesha has been a great addition to Herat Resident Office because she brings an exceptional design-build perspective,” said Nabil Abourialy, the Herat resident engineer. “She expedites in-house reviews on shop drawings and other project documentation, which helps us finish projects sooner. Ayesha also meets with large-scale project stakeholders—customers, contractors, end users, administrator and clients—to ensure that everyone knows the scope of a project, the role of each stakeholder and what USACE expects from each team member.”

“I have learned so much in my time here,” Saeed said. “The Afghan engineers and quality assurance representatives that I work with are extremely capable. Working side by side with them to deliver quality products is an awesome experience.”

The Herat Area Office employs nine Afghan engineers who are all graduates of Afghan Universities. They learn USACE processes while assigned as quality assurance representatives and have the opportunity to become project engineers as their skills develop.

Saeed said she has not experienced any significant prejudice as a result of her Pakistani heritage, but overcoming the cultural biases against women in Afghanistan has been a challenge.

“Compared to many Afghan women, I have not had a lot of difficulty working here, but I believe improving educational opportunities for women in Afghanistan will close the gap. Every opportunity I get, I try to demonstrate that women engineers are as capable as men,” Saeed continued. “My Afghan co-workers respect me and my work and that is really gratifying.”

Saeed will return to the United States and her previous job at the USACE Baltimore District in May.

“I never imagined having an opportunity to come back to this part of the world and make it better,” she said. “To contribute to the rebuilding of Afghanistan, in my small way, is a gift and memory I will always be proud of.”

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