



U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

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## *Sharing a culture of safety* USACE Team takes the safety message to job sites in Afghanistan

HELMAND PROVINCE, Afghanistan —Scaffolds and cinderblock stacks can topple; exposed table saw blades can cut; over-burdened electrical systems can short out; personal safety equipment can wear out; barrels of solvents can leak; lax safety standards can endanger workers.

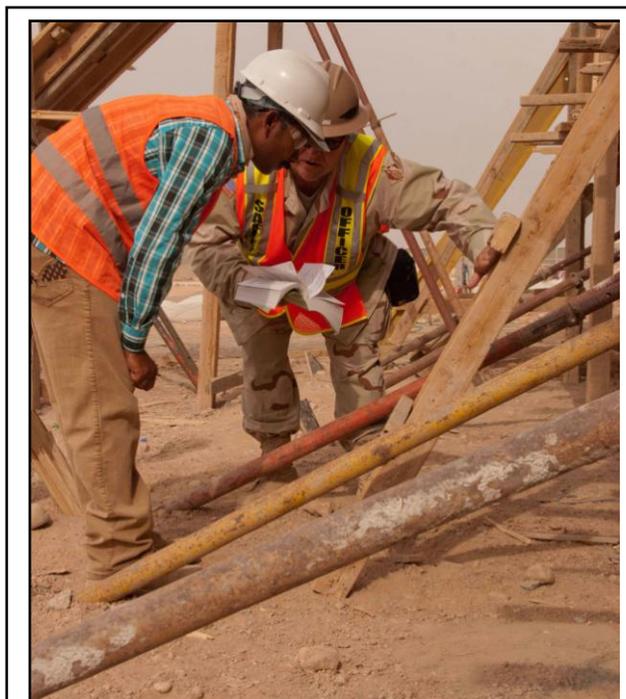
Jeffrey Ice, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Afghanistan District-South safety and occupational health specialist, was not even conducting a formal safety inspection as he found these and other safety deficiencies during a walk-through tour of projects at Camp Shorabak May 8.

“I think we saved a couple of welders’ eyesight and hands today,” said Ice after shutting down one welder working without a mask and demanding that others immediately be issued new heavy-duty gloves without holes and tears.

Ice will be spending about two weeks working with the resident office’s engineers and program managers inspecting work sites. However, most of his month on the Helmand province installation will be teaching safety fundamentals to contractors’ safety specialists, he said.

Later that afternoon and the following morning, Ice pulled extension cords from overloaded electrical junction boxes, demonstrated the safe method of stacking cinderblocks, took contractors’ safety representatives under wobbly scaffolding, photographed damaged excavators, reset loose generator ground wires and moved over-heating fire extinguishers out of the direct sunlight into the shade.

He also climbed ladders to check their stability, examined the labels on barrels of chemicals, and ordered a ditch digging crew to stop working because they were in a trench several feet over their heads



Jeffrey Ice, South District safety and occupational health specialist, discusses improvised ladders with a contractor’s safety specialist during a project site visit on the Afghanistan National Army’s Shorabak compound in Helmand province May 9. Ice looked over several projects managed by the Tombstone Resident Office and will be working with the construction companies’ safety personnel for next several weeks. (USACE photo, Dave Melancon)

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without retention walls or escape ladders. On his way out, he stopped and scrutinized job site safety notice bulletin boards.

“I find that most problems occur either at the start of a project because people don’t know what they are doing or toward the finish when they are rushing to get done,” Ice said.

Ice and the other South District safety team members have been going out to job sites since 2009 to observe safety practices, said Ron McDonald, deputy safety manager.

McDonald confirmed that the problems Ice found are not unusual for a job site in Afghanistan.

“We find many workers not wearing the appropriate personal protective equipment, working at heights without fall protection, working in deep trenches with inadequate means of getting out or improper means to prevent cave-ins or slope failure and the list goes on,” he said.

Part of the job is imparting the USACE safety culture to contractors and safety managers from different countries, each with its own construction methods and safety standards, he said.

“We have many construction companies from many nations that are in varying stages of developing a safety culture of their own, so it should be no great surprise that reaching satisfactory safety compliance in Afghanistan will not be easily achieved for any project USACE manages,” he said. “It took the United States centuries to develop its safety culture.

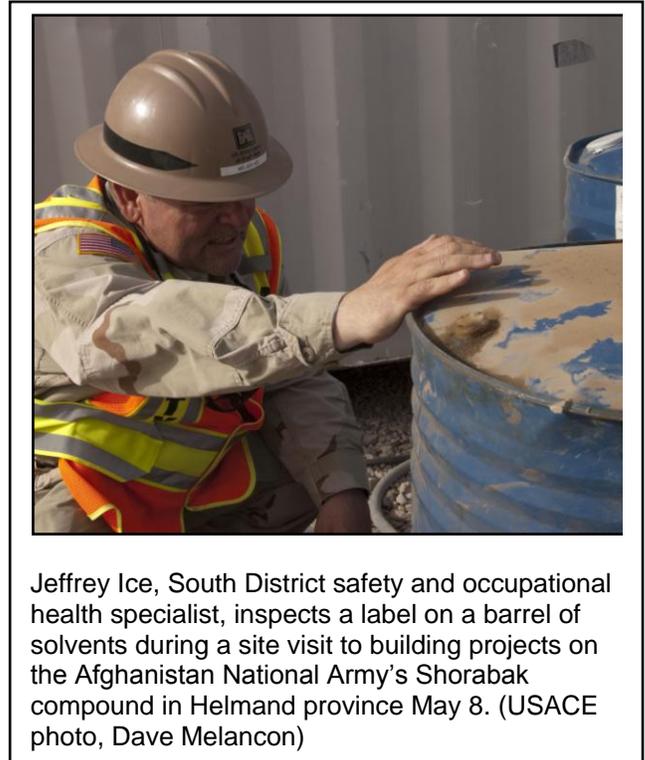
We should not expect the safety culture in Afghanistan to develop overnight.”

Most of the safety training takes place between the safety officer and the contractors’ site safety and health officer, known as SSHOs, McDonald said. The safety officer shows the SSHO the problem and the solution. The SSHO then passes on what he has learned to the workers and craftsmen.

“Working one-on-one with the contractor's SSHO is extremely productive,” he said. “Mentoring the contractor’s SSHO can be time consuming and difficult but results can be very impressive. Safety technicians are teachers. We try to place ourselves in the customer’s shoes to better understand why they may be struggling with a particular safety compliance issue.”

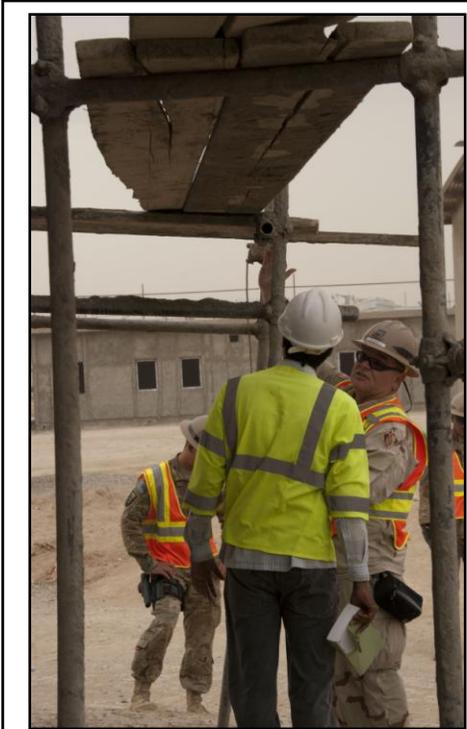
, Ice and his colleagues try to translate complex safety requirements and standards into terms easily understood by the SSHOs, who generally are not native English speakers. A heavily illustrated USACE safety manual written in Afghanistan’s primary languages, Pashto or Dari, helps them in this effort.

Job site face-to-face meetings allow the safety technician a chance to point out deficiencies to the SSHO and easily demonstrate ways to eliminate the defect and prevent problems from occurring later.



Jeffrey Ice, South District safety and occupational health specialist, inspects a label on a barrel of solvents during a site visit to building projects on the Afghanistan National Army’s Shorabak compound in Helmand province May 8. (USACE photo, Dave Melancon)

Project engineers and quality assurance representatives help set the safety standards from the job's start and for the project's duration, McDonald said, they establish and maintain the safety culture for a project during preconstruction meetings, reviews of the accident prevention plan, activity hazard analysis, preparatory meetings and daily work inspections.



Jeffrey Ice, South District safety and occupational health specialist, points out problems with a scaffold to a contractor's safety specialist during a site visit to building projects on the Afghanistan National Army's Shorabak compound in Helmand province May 9. (USACE photo, Dave Melancon)

Overall, the practice is working well, he said.

“The interaction between the contractor and the safety staff has varied from a welcome handshake to lengthy discussions that do not produce changes,” McDonald said. “The good thing is that most contractors appreciate our guidance and advice and are eager to improve their skills.”

The safety team's efforts are paying off, McDonald said.

“Formal investigations have been reduced by 50 percent from Fiscal Year 2011.”

A strong safety program and culture is also a good indication of a contractors' ability to get the done job on time, within budget and safely, McDonald said.

“You never find safety at the top and quality and production at the bottom; if you have good safety the other two are at the same level,” McDonald said. “Our goal is to continue to teach the ‘why’ safety is important and to assist Afghanistan in building a safety culture they can be proud of.”

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USACE's Afghanistan Engineer District-South provides design and construction services throughout southern Afghanistan to support the International Security Assistance Force and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan. The work is carried out in Regional

Commands South, Southwest and West with the goal of achieving counterinsurgency effects and bolstering the Afghan Government's services to its people.

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