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Helmand province electrical engineers, linemen receive training, new equipment

KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, Afghanistan -- Afghan engineers and linemen in Helmand province just got a major helping hand thanks to a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers program that taught Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (Afghanistan's electric utility company) employees how to safely operate the new electric utility trucks donated to them by the United States in early December.

"This is the second most important day for Helmand province," said Engineer Nabi, DABS-Helmand operations chief through an interpreter. "The first was when Kajaki Dam was built about 50 years ago." Nabi also said that this gift was the first of its kind and with the trucks and training his workers would be able to solve electric problems for many years.

Nabi and Haji Obaidi, the DABS-Helmand Director were on hand for the graduation ceremony and signing over of the 10 utility trucks Dec. 11.

Nabi said, "On behalf of DABS-Helmand, thank you USACE and America for providing DABS with the trucks and training. Both will make the linemen's jobs easier and faster."

Muhammad Farouq, one of the linemen agreed. Through the interpreter he said, "We used to take a full day to emplace just two poles. Now we will be able to do two poles in an hour."

The Lashkar Gah-based training included classroom and hands-on orientation and required coordination with DABS, Regional Command-Southwest who provided space for the truck and pole training and the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team who provided the classroom space.

USACE's 249th Prime Power Battalion non-commissioned officers organized and conducted the training. Staff Sgt. Daniel McKinney the senior NCO said the training introduced 15 DABS engineers and technicians to:

- fundamentals of safety
- power line maintenance



Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat engineers and linemen received training on the operation of their new utility trucks in Lashkar Gah, Helmand province in early December. They paused, prior to graduating the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers-provided training, for a group photo Dec. 11. (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Photo by Karla Marshall)

- operating “bucket trucks” that allow linemen to reach the top of utility poles

operating augur trucks used to drill and emplace utility poles
Overall, the linemen’s productivity is projected to increase by threefold.

“This training is absolutely critical to safely and effectively using the trucks donated by Regional Command-Southwest,” said Chief Warrant Officer 4 Robert Hopkins, USACE’s Prime Power liaison to battle space owners in Southern Afghanistan. “Using these vehicles to emplace a 3,000 pound concrete utility pole is not something these guys can learn from an operator’s manual. We had the capacity to teach.”

Of the 15 DABS employees who attended the training, the oldest had more than 20 years of service and the youngest, only 20 days.

“We weren’t sure how difficult it would be to teach through interpreters and with the varying levels of knowledge, but the guys learned faster than we expected,” said Staff Sgt. Troy Madden. “I was impressed by their interest and willingness to learn. In the beginning it was a little hectic, but it didn’t take long for everyone to get in the groove.”

The first day of training began with the issuing of safety equipment and coveralls. “We stressed safety throughout the course but really focused on it in the beginning,” said McKinney who, along with Madden, deployed from Schofield Barracks Hawaii. “The men were used to climbing poles with scaffolding and open-toed shoes. We gave them information and the tools to work more safely,” he continued.

The bucket trucks have two- and three-man buckets, said Madden. “We taught them to harness themselves into the buckets to prevent them from falling and how to maneuver the buckets for optimal use,” he continued.

The Afghanistan Engineer District-South provided similar training in Kandahar province in June 2012 and used the lessons learned to design this second course.

“We saw this training mission as two fold,” said Col. Vincent Quarles, Afghanistan Engineer District-South commander. “Provide the Afghan electric engineers and technicians with training so they could do their jobs safely and make sure the \$1 million U.S. taxpayer investment in the trucks and equipment was well spent.”

In addition to the training and truck donation, electric infrastructure improvements are also ongoing in Helmand province.

“The Corps of Engineers has done much since our arrival here to help the Afghan government transmit more consistent and reliable electricity,” Quarles continued. “In Helmand province we are repairing or replacing some of the existing transmission lines, rebuilding substations and will boost the continuous transmission of power from 18 megawatts to 51 megawatts.”

-30-

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