



NEWS RELEASE

U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

BUILDING STRONG®

For Immediate Release:
Jan. 8, 2011

Contact:
Paul Giblin, (540) 678-4944
paul.r.giblin@usace.army.mil

Corps of Engineers hosts conference for professional women in Kabul

KABUL – More than 80 Afghan women engineers and construction executives learned about professional opportunities and established new work relationships at a conference hosted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on Saturday, Jan. 8.

The inaugural Afghan Women in Engineering and Construction Conference was designed for women who own, manage or serve in upper-level management positions at engineering and construction-related businesses.

One of the attendees, Fatema Hakimzada, who serves as vice president of Demo Construction Co., which is based in Kabul, said she was thankful the Corps of Engineers conducted a symposium specifically for women, because business prospects for women in Afghanistan are extremely limited.

“Right now, today, I am very happy because we find this opportunity to be here,” Hakimzada said. She made several important contacts during the conference and she plans to bid on road construction work offered by the Corps of Engineers.

Conference attendees represented many Afghan business firms, plus various Afghan government ministries, the Afghan Builders Association, vocational schools and universities and the U.S. Embassy. The speakers discussed the Corps of Engineers’ overall program, contracting matters, and their personal and professional experiences in the the engineering and construction fields.

U.S. Embassy official Robyn Kessler said one of the most valuable aspects of the conference was providing women business leaders a professional setting to learn from other women business leaders.

“The most important thing is networking, the opportunity for companies to see who else is out there and what they’re doing,” said Kessler, a senior commercial officer with the U.S. Department of Commerce. “There’s so much going on in Afghanistan, particularly in the construction sector.”

Several U.S. women employees of the Corps of Engineers told the Afghan women about their own struggles to achieve executive positions the engineering and construction trades. Women excel in those fields in the United States now, but that wasn’t always true, they said.



U.S. Army Maj. Antoinette, the officer in charge of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' North Kabul Area Office, discusses business practices during the Afghan Women in Engineering and Construction Conference on Jan. 8, 2011. Photo by Paul Giblin, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

For example, Elizabeth Chien, who serves as a project manager for the Corps of Engineers' Operations and Maintenance Branch, recalled that when she was younger, her parents discouraged her from pursuing a college degree in engineering because they thought it would be too difficult for a woman. She heeded her parents' wish and instead obtained a degree in business management.

Chien worked as a business manager for 15 years, but never truly liked it, so after she was married and had a young child, she went back to college and earned an engineering degree. Then she worked for private engineering companies for six years, before she joined the Corps of Engineers seven years ago.

She credited Afghanistan's women engineers and construction executives for being strong and courageous. She also encouraged them to bid for Operations and Maintenance contracts, which would be well suited for emerging companies.

Another speaker, Donna Street, who serves as the area engineer in Mazar-E Sharif, followed a different route. She said she had strong support from her family, particularly from her late husband Bill, who always encouraged her to accept new responsibilities.



Fatema Hakimzada, vice president of Kabul-based Demo Construction Co. (center), inquires about business opportunities with Marie Huber, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers chief of capacity development (right in uniform) during the conference. Photo by Paul Giblin, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

She obtained an engineering degree as a young woman and has spent her entire career in the Corps of Engineers. She holds a senior executive position, though until recently, few women held senior positions.

Street urged the Afghan women to be firm and fair in their business dealings, to disregard disparaging comments by people who feel they're unsuited for the business, and to work harder than men to prove that they are suited for the business.

Marie Huber, who serves as chief of the Capacity Development Branch for the Corps of Engineers in northern Afghanistan, said she was encouraged by the number and enthusiasm of the attendees. She encouraged them to bid for Corps of Engineers contracts in coming months and promised assistance if they decide to form an association for women engineers and construction executives.

The Corps of Engineers is the primary organization building army bases, police stations, roads, airstrips and other infrastructure projects in Afghanistan to increase the country's stability and economy. The Corps of Engineers has two districts in the country – Afghanistan Engineer District-North, which is based in Kabul; and Afghanistan Engineer District-South, which is based in Kandahar.

End