



# NEWS RELEASE

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## Van Antwerp urges district employees to press mission in Afghanistan

**KABUL** – Lt. Gen. Robert L. Van Antwerp, the commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, commended military and civilian personnel on Wednesday, Feb. 9, for their “amazing” efforts to help rebuild Afghanistan under unrelenting expectations.

Speaking during a town hall style meeting at the Afghanistan Engineer District-North’s headquarters compound, Van Antwerp played off district commander Col. Thomas Magness’ oft-repeated refrain that district employees are completing a project a day.

“When you look at the program here and what you’re executing – your one project every day – it is just amazing,” Van Antwerp told more than 300 district employees and contractors who attended the meeting at the Qalaa House compound.

He noted that the district is just one of five districts in the entire Corps of Engineers organization that is scheduled to place more than \$1 billion worth of projects during fiscal 2011. In fact, the district is expected to place \$1.5 billion worth of new projects in the region that spans the northern portion of Afghanistan, a country the size of Texas.

Van Antwerp, the 52nd chief of engineers, made the remarks during what is expected to be his final official tour of Afghanistan before retiring in the spring after a 39-year military career, the final four years as leader of the Corps of Engineers.

The general told his audience in Kabul that expectations for Corps of Engineers workers, particularly those in Afghanistan, have changed dramatically in recent years. Simply performing engineering work no longer is good enough.

“The business today is a lot about relationships. It’s really amazing what engineers and others have to do to build relationships. You all have a lot of customers out there,” he said.

In Afghanistan, the Corps of Engineers has two missions: 1) Build police stations, army bases, roads and other infrastructure projects; and, 2) Build the country’s workforce by teaching engineering and construction job skills to Afghan nationals.



Lt. Gen. Robert L. Van Antwerp (right) speaks to Afghanistan Engineer District-North employees during a town hall meeting during his last official trip to Afghanistan before his retirement. Col. Thomas Magness (center) was among 300 who attended. Photo by Joe Marek, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The Corps of Engineers' primary mission to develop facilities for Afghanistan's security forces plays a vital role in the United States' and coalition forces' plans to withdraw military operations from the country in 2014, he said.

"We have a huge part in that. In fact, if you had to prioritize whether you're going to do something for the security forces or do something for milcon on one of our enduring bases, that milcon is going to take a second seat," Van Antwerp said using a term for "military construction." The first priority has to be assisting the Afghan security forces, he said.

To emphasize the Corps of Engineers' mission to develop Afghanistan's workforce, the general showed a Budweiser beer commercial that depicts a young Clydesdale horse aspiring to pull the famous red beer wagon. After struggling to pull the oversize carriage without budging it, two adult Clydesdales push the wagon from behind as the young horse huffs in triumph.

"I don't drink Budweiser, but I love that commercial," Van Antwerp said.

He told members of his audience that they likewise should seek to train Afghan workers to fill positions currently filled by Americans. He also urged older workers within the Corps of Engineers to train their younger colleagues. "They're our bench for the future," he said.

He noted that during just the past two years, 8,900 Corps of Engineers employees retired or otherwise left the organization, taking years of know-how and expertise with them. For example, the Corps

of Engineers has top-caliber 45 dam-safety experts, but virtually all 45 are nearing the ends of their careers.

“Here’s what I’ve been telling them: ‘You can’t leave until you teach somebody.’ So we have this little university going on right now – I know you have some universities that are going to help build capacity that you’re running right here – but we have one that’s called Dam University,” he said as the audience chuckled at the name.

The Dam University program is developing eight new geo-technical professionals, each of whom have been assigned to study under mentors to learn the nuances of the trade. Those eight new professionals will be looked upon as the top dam-safety experts in future years, Van Antwerp said.

In the same way, the heavy workflow in Afghanistan provides an ideal environment for experienced engineers and other professionals to teach those around them. He issued a challenge to senior employees: “There are two benches to build. One is the Corps bench that you’re building. The other is the Afghan bench.”

The general also noted that while he’s retiring soon, the mission in Afghanistan will continue for years, so he urged his audience to help recruit other civilians to serve in the future.

“When I go around, I just can’t tell people what you’re like. It’s hard to describe. I guess you’ve got to do that when you go back,” Van Antwerp said. “You’re our best recruiters. We’re going to be here for a while. And we’ve got a huge program to deliver.”

Jo-Ellen Darcy, assistant secretary of the Army for public works who oversees the Corps of Engineers, said Van Antwerp has left a lasting impression with the organization.

“I’m fortunate in the fact that I’ve been in this job for a year and a half, and I got to be the assistant secretary of the Army with Gen. Van Antwerp as the chief, so you all are very lucky to have known him,” she said.

Darcy told the audience that she never stepped foot in Afghanistan before making the trip with Van Antwerp. The experience had been eye-opening and she praised the district’s personnel for serving in the war-torn country.

“I thought that probably the biggest honor of my life was to be appointed by the president of the United States to this position, but when I come to a place like this and I see all of these people and everything that you do for the country, that’s my biggest honor,” she said. “Thank you for all that you do. Thank you for your service.”

Coincidentally, 2010 marked a milestone year for civilian service in Afghanistan and Iraq. During that year, the total number of civilian deployments exceeded 10,000 dating back to when the Corps of Engineers joined the counter-insurgency operation in 2004. The actual number of people who have worked in Afghanistan and Iraq is somewhat less, because some workers have deployed more than once.

Van Antwerp credited the 10,000-deployments figure to an array of civilian personnel that includes Corps of Engineers employees from across the United States, workers from other government agencies, and new-to-government workers called Schedule A's.

He said, "What that shows is the culture of the Corps of Engineers. It's an incredibly expeditionary culture. That is a milestone – 10,000 deployments."

During a question-and-answer session following the general's remarks, project engineer Marcus Garcia asked Van Antwerp and Darcy for their impressions of public opinion in the United States concerning Corps of Engineers' work in Afghanistan.

Darcy replied that the public generally is supportive, but after years of fighting and reconstruction following the 2001 terrorist attacks, the public's memory of the cause and purpose of the job is growing short. "Part of my mission and my responsibility is to make sure the American people are aware of what you're doing," she pledged.

Van Antwerp said that he too feels that some members of public have lost sight of the United States' purpose in Afghanistan, and as a result, are less supportive than they were years earlier. Indeed, people's attitudes have shifted inward during the decade since the attacks, he said.

"America has got to be bigger than that," he said. He too thanked the employees for their commitments to the cause.

Magness presented the general a number of gifts on behalf of the district's employees: a green ceremonial Afghan robe signifying his leadership position, a coffee table book of Afghanistan signed by district employees and a T-shirt with the district's logo.

Following the town hall meeting, Magness led Van Antwerp, Darcy, Brig. Gens. Jeffrey J. Dorko and Mark W. Yenter and others on a tour of on-going projects and initiatives around the district. The highlights included the new Afghanistan Ministry of Interior compound where facilities are under construction, Kabul University where the Corps of Engineers is assisting the engineering school and downtown Kabul streets where new solar-powered lights are being erected.

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