



SIGAR

Office of the Special Inspector General
for Afghanistan Reconstruction

May 22, 2018

General John W. Nicholson
Commander, U.S. Forces – Afghanistan

Dear General Nicholson,

I am writing to alert you to a safety matter that warrants the attention of DOD and U.S. Forces – Afghanistan (USFOR-A). Specifically, a bridge currently in use in Baghlan province, Afghanistan constructed using funds from the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) in 2008 seems to have been constructed using a poor design and poor quality material. Exacerbating those issues, the workmanship appears poor, the bridge has not been maintained, and the retaining walls have suffered significant damage that now poses a risk to people on or near the bridge.¹

As part of our ongoing effort to verify the location and condition of facilities or infrastructure built, refurbished, or funded by the U.S. as part of the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan, SIGAR is conducting site inspections of bridges in Afghanistan that were constructed or repaired with CERP funds. SIGAR is inspecting such bridges in several provinces and began its work in December 2017, by travelling to eight CERP bridge projects in Baghlan province. DOD obligated \$1.6M in funds for the eight CERP bridge projects. At each bridge site in Baghlan province, SIGAR conducted an assessment to determine the overall condition and use of the bridge, identify any safety concerns, and test the accuracy of location information maintained in DOD's records. We also interviewed a local Afghan government official and community members, and took photographs embedded with global positioning system and time/date information.²

At one such bridge in Baghlan province, we found significant damage. The condition of the bridge threatens the safety of persons on or near the structure. USFOR-A awarded the \$554,825 contract for the bridge project in September 2008, to replace an existing, dilapidated bridge that was on the verge of collapse. According to project documents, the new CERP bridge would benefit the local population by improving access to services and markets.³ Project documents also state that the project had been coordinated with Afghan officials, including the district governor and mayor. The Ministry of Public Works agreed to provide long-term maintenance for the project.

When we visited the bridge in December 2017, we observed extensive vehicle and pedestrian traffic traversing the bridge. A community member and an Afghan government official with whom we spoke cited the bridge's importance for commercial traffic and access to health facilities and schools. While we were unable to determine whether the damage to the bridge was been caused by a single event, such as an earthquake or flood, or if the damage was a result of a result of progressive deterioration due to lack of maintenance, the current condition of the bridge poses a serious risk. The Afghan government official we spoke with stated that the bridge had no budget for repairs and maintenance and had never been repaired. We are concerned that continued use of this bridge, in its present condition, poses a danger to users unless needed maintenance is undertaken.

¹ We also noted that the bridge joints appear to be filled with dirt and unlikely to function as designed.

² Due to safety concerns, SIGAR will reproduce the GPS coordinates and the name of the bridge in Enclosure II, but will withhold the enclosure from public release.

³ USFOR-A also cited the planned employment of local nationals in the rehabilitation work and improving the local population's perception of the Afghan government as reasons for the project.

Photographs 1 and 2 show the structural damage and current condition of the bridge in Baghlan province.

Photo 1: Eroding Bridge Wall



Source: SIGAR December 12, 2017.

Photo 2: Visible Cracks on Another Retaining Wall



Source: SIGAR December 12, 2017.

We understand that the U.S. government's involvement with this bridge project ended when the project was completed and the final payment was made to the contractor in early 2010. However, our site visit showed that Afghan government does not appear to be conducting the requisite maintenance and upkeep to ensure the safety of the structure and protect the DOD investment. We believe that notification of responsible Afghan government bodies would be prudent for the safety of those who use the bridge. As a result, SIGAR will notify our interlocutors within the Afghan government of the safety concerns associated with this bridge and urge them to take prompt action for its repair. To help ensure that this issue reaches the appropriate persons within the Afghan government, we suggest USFOR-A take similar action to notify its Afghan government counterparts of the risks posed by this neglected, and heavily trafficked, bridge.

We provided a draft of this letter to DOD for comment on April 25, 2018. We received technical comments from DOD on May 17, 2018, which we incorporated, as appropriate. In its comments, DOD officials stated that U.S. Forces-Afghanistan would notify the Afghan government of the safety concern discussed in the letter. DOD also stated that a preliminary analysis of project documents by DOD engineers indicates the reinforced concrete bridge and the wing walls appear to be independent structures that meet at the bridge abutment, and that erosion of soil from behind the wing walls could negatively impact the approach road but would not impact the bridge span itself. DOD engineers agreed that the wing walls should be repaired to prevent further erosion.

We conducted our work in Kabul Afghanistan; Baghlan, Afghanistan; and Washington, D.C. from December 2017 through March 2018, in accordance with SIGAR's quality control standards. These standards require that we carry out work with integrity, objectivity, and independence, and provide information that is factually accurate and reliable. SIGAR performed this Special Project under the authority of Public Law No. 110-181, as amended, and the Inspector General Act of 1978 and the Inspector General Reform Act of 2008. Should you or your staff have any questions about this project, please contact Mr. Matthew Dove, Director of Special Projects, (703) 535-6051 or matthew.d.dove.civ@mail.mil.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. F. Sopko', written in a cursive style.

John F. Sopko

Special Inspector General
for Afghanistan Reconstruction