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## The Road to Bamiyan

### A Public Works Debacle that Defines Afghanistan

By Jochen-Martin Gutsch

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**It was to be a symbol of reconstructed Afghanistan: a paved highway from Kabul to the beautiful valley of Bamiyan. Construction has long been underway, but the project may never be completed -- a victim of the realities in present-day Afghanistan.**

Three times a week, weather permitting, an old Antonov operated by the East Horizon Airlines struggles into the air above Kabul. With a little luck, the aircraft lands 30 minutes later on the dirt runway in the provincial capital Bamiyan. The Russian-made plane is slightly rusty on the outside, well-worn inside and, at 50 years old, is not allowed to fly fully loaded. Otherwise, it is unable to clear the Hindu Kush range, which almost surrounds Kabul like a gigantic wall.

Those who chose not to fly to Bamiyan can drive there. North of Kabul begins a road leading through the Ghorband district, a region that became infamous in 2012 after a video showing a mob stoning a young woman went viral. In many places, the road is in terrible shape, full of deep potholes and unpaved. Recent years have seen several Taliban assaults along the arterial, in addition to attacks by thieves and kidnappers.

The third route to Bamiyan is a road that begins in Maidan Shahr, a town located 30 kilometers (19 miles) southwest of Kabul. The new project, paid for with money from the West, is still under construction. But one day, the plan foresees cars zooming across a smooth asphalt surface at 100 kilometers per hour (60 miles per hour) or more, past traders and daytrip destinations. Once the road is completed, the entire trip from Kabul to Bamiyan by car would take a mere three hours.

The street doesn't have an opulent name and, if it is ever finished, will be a mere 136 kilometers long -- just a small strip of asphalt in the enormous country of Afghanistan. It leads through Wardak Province, a sparsely settled, dusty region, before crossing the Koh-i-Baba Mountains over 3,700 meter (12,140 foot) Hajigak Pass. From there, the two-lane road descends into Bamiyan Valley, one of the poorest regions in poverty-stricken Afghanistan. For all its modesty, however, the project tells the tale of Afghanistan's recent history: its hopes, its hardships, its madness and its failures. From its shoulders, one has a view of the last few years and the immense attempt to rebuild the country.

In December, after 13 years, the international intervention in Afghanistan -- once comprised of 40 countries and as many as 140,000 troops -- is coming to an end. For a time, fully 26 United Nations organizations were operating in the country with foreign governments and private agencies pumping in billions of dollars. And millions were earmarked for the road to Bamiyan.

### **'Too Dangerous'**

Maidan Shahr, where it begins, is little more than a dirty collection of houses, but it is strategically important. The highway south to Kandahar, which connects Kabul with the south, gets its start here too.

Mohammed Fahimi, a representative in the Wardak provincial council, also lives in the village. He is happy to talk, but advises this reporter against coming to his hometown. "It's too dangerous at the moment," he says on the phone. So we meet in Kabul, where Fahimi explains that the road still isn't finished, despite several years of work. "Only the first section has been completed, 50 to 60 kilometers," he says. After that, the asphalt comes to an end and the road turns to dirt.

Fahimi also advises against driving on the road. "Even I wouldn't use it if it weren't absolutely unavoidable, like now during the campaign," he says. "And then only with plenty of security: Thirty police officers, two pick-ups with mounted machine guns and two armored vehicles."

It was in 2002 that the Italian Foreign Ministry asked the new Afghan government how it could assist the country. The wounds of Sept. 11, 2001 were still fresh, American troops had marched into Kabul and the entire world wanted to help, eager to build schools, dig wells, erect hospitals, lay out women's gardens and establish democracy. Every project was seen as a weapon in the fight against international terrorism. Germany, too, was being defended in the Hindu Kush, politicians said at the time.

The Afghan government told the Italians they wanted a road, a connection between Kabul and Bamiyan -- between the capital and the isolated hinterlands. It was also to be a symbol of reconciliation. The Hazara live in Bamiyan Province, a people who suffered a great deal under Taliban rule. The Italians agreed.

At the time, only about 100 kilometers of the roads in Afghanistan were paved. But the new road was more than just a modest effort to extend that network and it wasn't just leading to an unknown Afghan village with a difficult-to-pronounce name. Bamiyan was known throughout the world for being a site of Islamist excess. It was there that the Taliban in 2001 blew up the "unislamic" Buddhas of Bamiyan, at 53 and 35 meters high, the tallest Buddha statues in the world. They were also some 1,500 years old, and their destruction became symbolic of the Taliban's barbarism. The new road would connect the site to Kabul.

## **Death Road**

Work began in August 2006 after the project was kicked off with a large ceremony attended by Afghan President Hamid Karzai, Western diplomats and Habiba Sarabi, who was governor of the Bamiyan Province at the time. Even today, she is still emotional when talking about that day. "It was one of the most special moments in my life," she says.

Eight years later, in 2014, Mohammed Fahimi opens a worn out notebook and says: "It goes like this, for example. A car is stopped. The people have to get out. They are blindfolded and then lined up at the edge of the road. Then the Kalashnikovs do their work. The corpses are left by the roadside. That's what happened in ...," Fahimi looks into his notebook, "... the spring of 2012."

In recent years, Fahimi has sought to document every incident on the road in his notebook, insofar as he hears about them. The journal is incomplete, but it gives one an impression of the situation. Twenty to 30 dead in four years, Fahimi says, killed by mines, homemade explosives or targeted gunfire. Not to mention the hold-ups and ransom kidnappings.

"Sometimes, the police are only 100 meters away, but they don't do anything out of fear," Fahimi says. "The Taliban disappear from the road again and vanish into their areas, the villages." The road has even received a nickname among Afghans and in the press: Death Road.

"In the beginning, everything went well," says Ahmad Najafi, the 55-year-old who has been head of the project since 2005. He is sitting in the Public Works Ministry in Kabul, an old Russian concrete-block building with dark hallways, dirty carpeting and several broken windows. Sometimes, foil is taped over the holes, but sometimes it isn't, allowing the wind to whistle through the building as through a haunted castle.

The ministry has had a difficult time lately. In April, the deputy minister was abducted on his way to work. Then complaints began flooding in because many roads in the country were disintegrating under rainfall like Saltine crackers. Ahmad Najafi, in his third-floor office, doesn't look particularly happy either. He has been working in the ministry for 32 years and has seen the Russians, the mujahedeen, the Taliban and the Westerners come and go. The revolving door of power is the only thing that people in Afghanistan can really depend on.

### **A Restful Province**

"We didn't run into any problems during the surveying phase. Everything was just fine. The construction firm for the first section was China Railway," Najafi explains, adding that their offer was the cheapest. And they brought everything with them: construction machinery and workers as well, a total of 300 people. "We established a construction camp and everything was ready. But the attacks soon began. Machinery was stolen or burned. One engineer was even killed by a mine." Finally, the Chinese financial supervisor was taken hostage for three months. "Because of the Taliban attacks, we had to keep discontinuing construction, sometimes for months at a time."

Eventually, they drove to the villages to speak with the elders, often a necessary step to solve problems in Afghanistan. Wardak is a restful province populated by Pashtuns, and a place where the state has little power. But village residents are well connected with the Taliban. "In the end, we paid the people in the villages to protect our construction project," Najafi says.

He says that forcing the payment of protection money is a tried-and-true business model. First, the Taliban spreads fear and terror before village elders then send their people to promise security. The protection money is then shared out. In other words, a portion of the €100 million the Italian state made available for the road flows directly into Taliban pockets.

When asked how long it took to build the first section of the road, Najafi answers, "Five years. For 54 kilometers."

After that, the Chinese no longer wanted to help with the rebuilding of Afghanistan. They didn't even make an offer for the second section of the road.

"They left as fast as they could. They even left their construction machinery behind," Najafi says. He steps up to the big map hanging in his office. The second section of the road leads through the towering Koh-i-Baba Mountains across Hajigak Pass. It is rugged territory.

To speed up the project, two companies are working together on the second section, with kilometer 54 to 74 being built by the Afghan firm Gholghola. It belongs to Mohammed Nabi Khalili, a brother of the Afghan vice president. Khalili describes the situation in his region as follows: "Quiet. Two people have thus far been shot at, machinery destroyed and the construction camp was attacked with rockets." Khalili himself has avoided the road since a remotely detonated IED ripped apart his car not far from Maidan Shahr. Somehow, he managed to survive.

### **Starting from the Beginning**

The Afghan company Omran is responsible for kilometer 74 to 98 with the Iranian firm Abad Rahan Pars building kilometer 98 to 136, the longest segment. It is also the safest, deep in peaceful Bamiyan.

Hassan Norusi, a lonely man from Isfahan, is head of construction for the final segment. In the construction camp, he has the Afghan chef cook Iranian dishes in an attempt to combat his homesickness. Every day, Norusi hopes that he will soon be able to leave Afghanistan. "There is nothing here, not even electricity," he says. Furthermore, Norusi says, the road is of extremely poor quality. The way it is being built, he says, means that it won't last much beyond three or four years at the most.

The new road is of poor quality? Ahmad Najafi, sitting behind his ministry desk in Kabul, thinks for a moment. "That is the concern, yes."

Such worries have to do with the asphalt. The road was built with a layer of asphalt that is six centimeters (2.4 inches) thick, consistent with the Italian blueprints. "But we have extreme winters here with snowfall and extreme heat in the summer," he explains. Then there are the trucks, completely overloaded, that drive on the roads. And we have bomb attacks and mines." Really, a 10 centimeter layer is necessary, Najafi says, or even 11.

The construction companies say the same. The road, as currently built, would work well as a connector to Turin or Florence. The first 54 kilometers, finished in 2011, are already in need of repairs, Najafi says. Which means that the end of the highway isn't even finished yet and they already have to start again from the beginning. It is difficult to comprehend: So much effort, so much money, so many people who risked their lives. And the road top is too thin.

Originally, the plans called for tunnels to be built as well, due to the up to eight meters of snow that accumulates during the winter on Hajigak Pass. But the budget is tight and the Italians don't want to throw more money at the project, so the tunnels have been struck from the blueprint, meaning the road will likely have to be closed in the wintertime. "We have neither machinery nor money for snow removal," Najafi says.

## **An Eternal Optimist**

The road can be clearly seen from above, visible to those who board the old, rickety Antonov for the flight to Bamiyan as it winds its way through the mountains. But the route must be breathtakingly beautiful. "From a tourism perspective, it is the most beautiful drive in Afghanistan, a real experience," says Mohammed Reza Ibrahim.

Ibrahim, the 32-year-old director of the Bamiyan Tourism Association, is an incurable optimist. The road has already become part of his great vision, that of making "tourism into the most important economic sector in Bamiyan." He also has a plan.

He leads the way through the empty courtyard of a hostel. It is an odd place, perhaps because it is so peaceful. "Come along," he says before heading down a flight of stairs into a small basement. Ibrahim opens the door and switches on the light. "Here," he says, pointing proudly to a few shelves.

Sitting on the shelves are perhaps 40 pairs of downhill skis of all sizes, ski boots and three snowboards. The equipment is used, donated from New Zealand, Austria and Switzerland, and is now sitting in what is likely the only such ski storage basement in all of Afghanistan, a country full of dramatic mountains with no skiers. For now.

Mohammed Ibrahim would like to change that. "We have the best conditions for ski tourism," he says, stroking one of the snowboards. "We have high mountains. We have snow. We have long winters. And in 2015, we will hopefully be getting three snowmobiles."

Only the tourists and the skiers are missing. "Last year, we unfortunately only had about 800 registered visitors to Bamiyan," Ibrahim says, and almost all of them were Afghans. A few Westerners from NGOs also made the trip from Kabul, hoping for a few days of relaxation. Ibrahim knows that for people from outside of Afghanistan, his country is akin to the heart of darkness.

But he prefers to concentrate on the potential. Bamiyan Valley is a green jewel in a dusty, dangerous country. In the 1970s, before all of the wars, over 100,000 tourists visited Bamiyan every year.

## **Paragliding in the Hindu Kush?**

Ibrahim would like to turn the clock back to those rosier times. "First, we are concentrating on domestic tourism," he says. Later, he hopes that international guests will begin coming again as well. "We can offer everything here: trekking in the mountains, rafting in the rivers, even paragliding. We have attractions to offer, like the lakes in Band-e-Amir, Afghanistan's first national park."

It is nice to meet someone in Afghanistan who hasn't yet been driven to despair by the current state of the country. Ibrahim's optimism is almost American in its indestructability. Listening to



him, visitors from the West feel like traitors, because the West has long since lost all hope for Ibrahim's country and has but a single goal: getting out.

"You see, I am an optimist," Ibrahim says. "How else can you survive in Afghanistan?"

He sees the new road as a gateway to the world. And vastly superior to the rickety Antonov. Still, he adds, it would be nice to know when that gateway might open, or if it ever will.

Not even Vittorio Roscio knows for sure. Originally, the road was scheduled to open in August of 2015. Roscio, a 59-year-old from Italy, looks exhausted sitting in a plain room in the Italian government compound in Kabul. It is from here that he oversees construction as a kind of Western watchdog. His job is to keep an eye on Italy's money.

"Six centimeters of asphalt are definitely enough," Roscio says. "Of course, a bit more might have been nice, as would a tunnel in the mountains. But unfortunately we have to stay within the budget." And the budget is €100 million. Roscio knows that he can save himself the trouble of asking Rome for a few million more -- for a road project in Afghanistan with an uncertain outcome. Afghanistan's importance has waned for the West over the years, becoming an almost forgotten problem child that is slowly disappearing into the haze of history. After 13 years, everyone is tired, disillusioned and annoyed.

Roscio, who has been in the country for seven years, says that he likes Afghanistan. He complains that people from the West think too simply and don't see the pitfalls that can befall a project like the one he is leading. The cemeteries, for example. "Afghans bury their dead everywhere. Sometimes there is a small mound, but many graves are virtually unrecognizable as such. And suddenly, the villagers come up and say: 'You can't build a road here. People are buried here.'" In such situations, they have two possibilities, Roscio explains. They can change the route, which is very expensive, or they can rebury the dead, which is extremely delicate. "Go to a Pashtun family and say: 'Salam aleikum. We would like to exhume your dead father. Would you be opposed?'"

### **In a Convertible to Bamiyan**

Roscio hasn't visited the construction site for ages because it is too dangerous. Instead, he reads the reports here, behind the walls of the Italian government's campus in Kabul. Over the years, the walls became thicker and thicker, the barbed wire higher and the security protocols stricter. In 2007, Rocio could still walk relatively freely through the streets of Kabul. Now, though, he climbs into a bullet-proof Toyota SUV even for the 30 meters to the Italian Embassy.

Like all international workers in Kabul, Roscio lives in the equivalent of a high security cage and is rarely allowed to go out. As such, his influence over the road to Bamiyan has fallen markedly over the years.

"It is unfortunately extremely difficult to understand Afghanistan from the perspective of Kabul," Roscio says tiredly. "And it is completely impossible to understand Afghanistan from Europe or

America. No chance." He gets into one of the bullet-proof Toyotas and is driven to the Italian Embassy. The wall opens briefly to let him out and closes again immediately.

In the Embassy, Italian Ambassador Luciano Pezzotti is waiting. He also has something to say about the road, but somehow he just forgot what it was exactly. Pezzotti is a stylish man who was previously posted in the Consulate General in Jerusalem. A grand piano is in the ground floor of the residence and the walls are decorated with a framed photo of Pezzotti with Pope Benedict XVI and another of him in the Ferrari Formula One camp. Pezzotti likes fast cars, a possible explanation for the sentence he utters after the obligatory statements on Afghan elections and progress on women's rights. "I bet that in 10 years, you will be able to drive a convertible from Kabul to Bamiyan without trouble," he says. "On the new road."

It is a nice bet. But Mohammed Ibrahim, the optimistic tourism director from Bamiyan, prefers looking for alternatives. "We want to establish direct international flights," he says, after emerging from the basement full of skis. "From Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan. The motto could be: 'Come directly to Bamiyan! The safest place in Afghanistan!'"

Then, people could just fly right over the cursed road. Over the Taliban, the IEDs, the poverty and the madness. Over the entire traumatized country, which, after 13 years of international engagement, once again finds itself back at the beginning.