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Pentagon wasted millions on reconstruction in Afghanistan

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US lawmakers on Wednesday ridiculed a Pentagon program that saw millions of taxpayer dollars sent to Afghanistan for investment initiatives that included importing rare blond Italian goats and the construction of a useless gas station.

The now-disbanded Task Force for Business and Stability Operations spent close to \$800 million to encourage investment in war-torn Afghanistan over a period of about five years.

But it suffered from poor oversight and much of the cash went to projects beset with waste, fraud and abuse, according to John Sopko, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

Sopko, who testified before senators from a special committee on military management, grabbed headlines in recent months with the release of a string of damning reports including one saying the military spent \$43 million on a natural-gas car filling station that should have cost a fraction as much.

Senator Claire McCaskill of Missouri called that endeavor "dumb on its face."

"There's never been any data presented that the ridiculous fuel station in Afghanistan helped anything... it was unsustainable and totally impractical," she fumed, noting that the average Afghan earns only \$690 annually, while it costs \$800 to convert a car to run on natural gas.

"Did anybody in the room sit there and say, 'Is there anybody that can afford this?'" she added. "The 120 cars we did (convert), we paid for."

Brian McKeon, the Pentagon's principal deputy under secretary of defense for policy, disputed Sopko's \$43 million figure, saying the actual amount was "well under" \$10 million.

He defended other programs too, including the \$150 million to build privately owned villas equipped with flat-screen TVs and private security guards for US government employees, instead of having them live on US military bases.

McKeon argued the villas were used to house international entrepreneurs to show "they could come to Afghanistan and do business."

'Ill-conceived'

Lawmakers responded by bemoaning the lack of metrics to determine if this or any program actually had a positive effect on the Afghan economy or the security situation, which remains fragile more than 14 years after the US-led invasion turfed out Taliban militants.

Known by its acronym SIGAR, Sopko's office has long been a critic of spending in Afghanistan. He highlighted several programs that he said demonstrated America's "scattershot" approach to economic development in the country.

These included the importation of rare blond Italian goats to bolster the cashmere industry in Herat, and pricey initiatives to boost the extraction of minerals in projects that ultimately resulted in the Afghan government awarding contracts to the Chinese.

"SIGAR has not been able to find credible evidence showing that (the task force's) activities in Afghanistan produced the intended economic growth or stabilization outcomes that justified its creation," SIGAR said in a statement.

"On the contrary, (its) legacy in Afghanistan is marred by unfinished, poorly planned, and ill-conceived projects."

Officially at least, the Pentagon said it welcomed the attention generated by SIGAR.

"We appreciate SIGAR's continued efforts to identify potential vulnerabilities and make constructive recommendations to improve the oversight and accountability of US taxpayer-funded assistance to Afghanistan," Pentagon spokesman Christopher Sherwood said.

Lawmakers also questioned why the Pentagon was even involved in the effort to spur private investment, noting it might be better achieved through the State Department or the US Agency for International Development.

The United States has spent about \$1 trillion in fighting and reconstruction during the years it has been in Afghanistan. Some 2,200 US lives have been lost in the longest war in US history.

