

Kabul Journal
by
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Chapter 17 – International Diplomacy

Tuesday, July 25, 2006

11:30 AM

So are we going tomorrow or not? That is the question. This is also the question that we've been asking for the last three weeks. The mission to Tajikistan has been pushed back twice now.

If we do go tomorrow, then it puts me on the road back home. This mission to Tajikistan is the main reason I returned to Afghanistan following my trip home in late May/early June. If we go tomorrow, I can then finalize my departure date from Afghanistan and get the termination paperwork for the State Department rolling. Maybe I can even be back in time for the first Aggie home football game!

I'm taking a small Afghan delegation to Tajikistan to initiate the first ever water discussions between the two nations. The stakes are high for both nations and for the region as a whole.

12 PM

Just now, I check my email again, but still no update from the Afghans. I try calling but their cell phones are off. Did they get their visas this morning? Did anyone locate the letter of invitation? Are we going tomorrow?

First Mission To Dushanbe

If we do go tomorrow, it will be my second mission to Tajikistan. In April, Howard (the Senior Advisor for Energy) and I went up at the invitation of the US Embassy in Dushanbe. The purpose was to explore possible joint energy development and power generation, and to provide advice to the Tajik government on how to move forward.

In this part of the world, energy and power generation means water and hydro, so Howard insisted that I come along. Our host, or "control officer" for the visit was the Political Officer at the Dushanbe Embassy, Elizabeth. The Dushanbe Embassy provided us a driver and an armored SUV for our entire visit, available 24 hours a day!

xxx

Saturday April 15, 2006

This is our third day in Dushanbe. We came in around noon on Thursday on the UN flight. Our first afternoon here was fairly relaxing; the only meetings were with the US Ambassador and a dinner meeting with Elizabeth at, surprisingly an El Salvadorian restaurant. But yesterday, it was non-stop meetings, starting at 8:00 am. We spent the day with energy ministry and utility officials, contractors and NGOs.

The highlight of the day for me was the 22 course lunch we had with the Chairman of the Tajik National bank, which was served in a formal dinner hall at the bank itself. The US Ambassador came along for what turned out to be a surprisingly informal lunch meeting for such a formal setting and meal. Energy, water and economy development were the topics.

Howard and I didn't know it at the time, but our status changed during the meeting, from just another couple of typical State Department officials blowing into town, to two important experts with valuable knowledge who should be sought out and listened to.

Our Day Off

But today, is our free day. It's 8:25 AM. I'm standing outside the hotel, waiting for the car and for Howard. The hotel is a large, ugly building constructed during Soviet era, as what I suppose, was an upscale business class hotel for it's time. Today, it still has the same uncomfortable Soviet beds, dark hallways and crusty carpet; the unfriendly staff and the smoky musty rooms, seemingly unchanged since the fall of the communists. Elizabeth apologized for putting us here, but the "other" hotel is full with a conference.

The driver arrives right on time at 8:30, just as Howard walks out of the hotel's front entrance. We head north out of town and follow a river up into the mountains. Just before the pass through the highest peaks, the road is closed due to repair of a tunnel, so, we turn onto a dirt road and continue up the mountain until we're finally forced to stop because of a rock slide.

Howard and I get out of the SUV. Howard hikes up the road, slowly growing smaller until he disappears around a corner. I instead hike down to the overlook of a village nestled in the valley below, with grass and mud roofs on some building, "*Straight out of the middle ages*" says Howard.

But the area is spectacular. In Tajikistan, we can freely walk around without the crowds of armed guards or soldiers. I'm alone, outdoors, free to think, relax and to linger, a welcomed respite from the armed compounds and the constant presence of guns, guards and soldiers in Afghanistan





Both Howard and I are amazed at the mountain climbing cattle of Tajikistan!



On the way back to Dushanbe, we stop for a late lunch at a river-side restaurant. We drink Tajik beer, eat local food and enjoy the pleasantly cool afternoon, and the roar of the rapids below.

The driver is friendly and speaks a little English, his third language, as this was once a part of the Soviet Union with the official language of Russian and now Tajik.



Monday, April 17, 2006

I'm not a happy camper this morning. Today, we were supposed to get up and go, leave for our road trip along the Panj River. The Panj is the large tributary of the Amu Darya that forms most of the border with Afghanistan. I've been looking forward to seeing this famous river and remote part of the world, a rare opportunity for anyone. The plan was for a 6-hour drive along the river to the Dastijum Dan site, then another few hours to the guest house where we'd spend the first night.

But, yesterday (Sunday), Elizabeth calls. The Deputy Prime Minister wants to meet with us Monday morning. At that time, Elizabeth said that there was talk of a helicopter ride to the dam site, but this morning she seems very doubtful.

The meeting with the Deputy Prime Minister doesn't happen until 10:30 and then he's late. We sit in his office and talk about hydro development on the border and how it could greatly benefit both nations. After 45 minutes, he says it's time to go. The helicopter is waiting for us!

It turns out that it was the Prime Minister of Tajikistan who dispatched the helicopter and sent along with us the Deputy Prime Minister, the Energy Minister and senior representatives of the Tajik Design Institute that did the pre-feasibility studies for the dam - just in case Howard and I had questions. Elizabeth is impressed by the change in our status over the last few days. Our visit is opening doors of access that the Embassy has never had.

We quickly return to the Embassy. Howard and I change out of our suits while Elizabeth takes care of some final paperwork. For the trip, we're assigned two armored SUVs, each with a driver and a body guard. The guards carry a hand gun that they keep out-of-sight. Elizabeth, Howard, I and one of the guards are dropped off at the airport, and the vehicles depart for the long 7 hour drive to our rendezvous site on the Panj River.



The helicopter reminds me of the Soviet era military helicopters I rode in while in Russia and Uzbekistan over 10 years ago, large and noisy. But I have ear plugs and the hope that this chopper is not that old, or at least is better maintained.

Tour of Dastijum

We first land at the village of Dashtidzham (Dastijum), about a 45-minute flight from Dushanbe. Here we pick up the chairmen of the two administrative districts that we're traveling through on this tour. We review maps of the Panj River gorge, then load up for our ride over the dam and reservoir sites and up to the village of Khostou.



As we approach the location selected for the dam, the Deputy Prime Minister asks me to sit with him and Howard. I'm hesitant to be tied down to a specific seat and mention that I'd like to take photos. I'm immediately sent forward to sit in the cockpit with the pilots, who turn out to be British.

The view is almost beyond description and the ride is wild. The cockpit is a bubble glass and plastic design, so we have great views all around, including below our feet. These are some of the highest mountains in the world, peaks reaching over 24,000 feet.



While it's difficult to do a dam site evaluation flying over in a helicopter, the site looks good, a constriction in the gorge with what appears to be bedrock on both sides of the river for anchoring the dam. And this dam will be huge, over thousand feet tall (320 meters to be exact), capable of generating 4000 MW, and storing 14 million acre-feet, sufficient water to open up millions of acres of new agricultural land.







We land at the small village of Khostou where two Tajik government vehicles wait for us. We say farewell and thank the Deputy Prime Minister and other officials. The district chairmen accompany us for the short drive to small village where we will eat lunch and hang out until the Embassy vehicles arrive. They're still about 5 hours away, so we have time to linger.



As we head to the meeting pavilion, we pass two villagers who are slaughtering a lamb in our honor. The pavilion is already prepared with blankets, floor cushions, drinks, and the first of many courses to come.



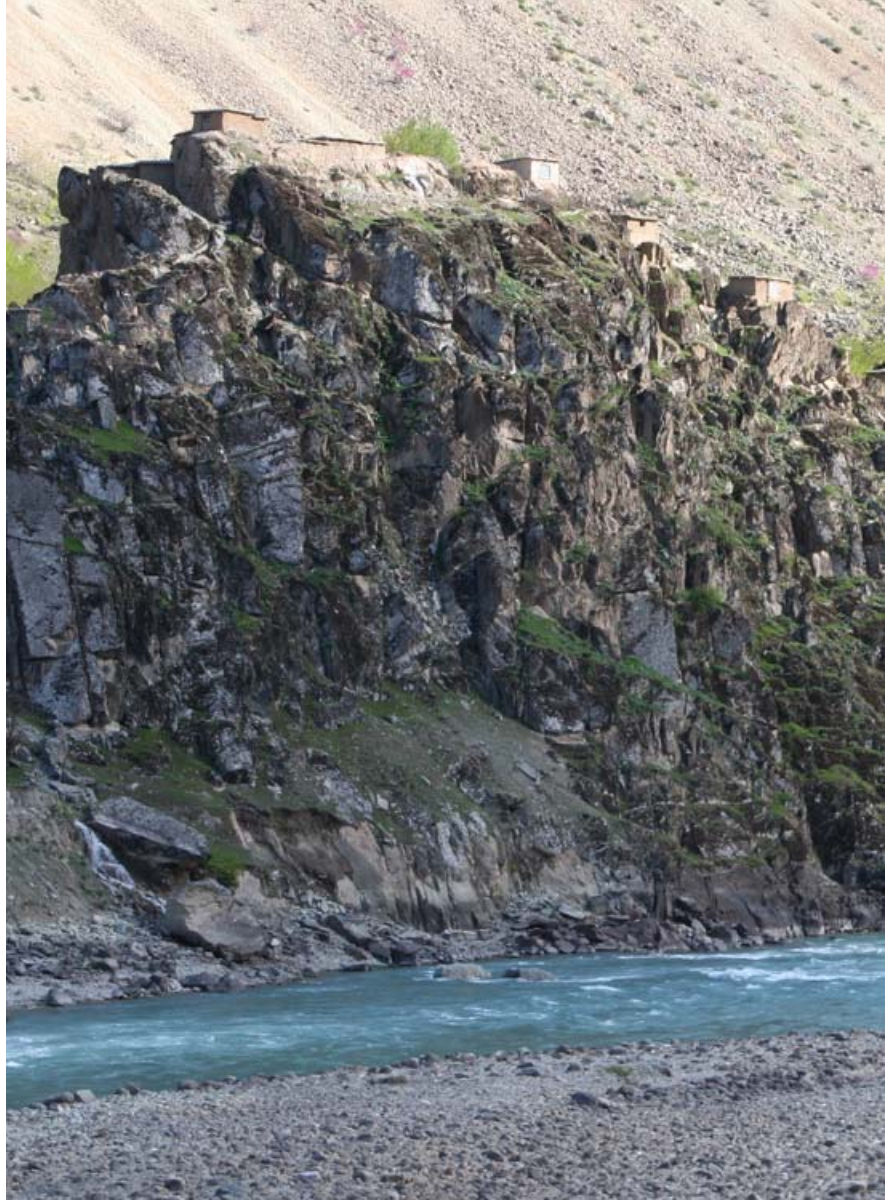
Vodka

With the soft drinks and water bottles, sit several bottles of Vodka. As in Russia and all former parts of the Soviet Union, meals like this mean vodka and toasts, and more vodka and toasts, and even more vodka and toasts.

I know what to expect and take great efforts to avoid all but one obligatory toast. I take pictures, get up to check on the progress of the meal, talk with the locals, and secretly fill my shot glass with water.

Howard is new to this, and immediately decides that he will out-toast and out-drink the Tajiks, a mistake that he will regret - but not until tomorrow morning. Howard initiates one toast after another, and the Tajiks are taken back by his aggressive speed. As Howard refills his shot glass for yet another toast, he jests, “*My glass has a hole in it!*” but no one laughs.

After a couple of hours, the meal is pretty much complete. I get up for a walk and to take photos of the area. Elizabeth joins me. We hike down the river road a few miles and talk about the difference on the two sides of the river, marking the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan.



Tajikistan is poor, but the road is paved, the villages have electricity, people live in brick or cinderblock houses with windows and a regular roof, a school bus comes by in the morning to pick up the children.

On the Afghan side of the river, there's only a dirt trail, no power lines or electricity, and houses made out of mud with grass roofs. These houses often blend in with the surrounding rock and land, making them hard to pick out.



We make it back to the village after about 1½ hours, and much to our astonishment, Howard is still toasting.





Tuesday, April 18, 2006

Howard had a bad night. But the good news is that he doesn't remember. In fact he lost about 14 hours, since sometime after the meal yesterday afternoon. The guest house where we spent the night is pretty basic, but the people are friendly and do their best to provide a good breakfast. The cost of lodging and breakfast is \$10 a person.



We continue our spectacular drive up the Panj River. Howard maintains pretty well and livens up when we arrive at the village of Sonabad (Rushan). Here, the Tajiks are planning to alter the path of a six-mile stretch of the river.

The river will be diverted into a large pipeline running through a one-mile long tunnel, to a hydro-generating plant. The water will then be discharged back into the river downstream. A treaty with Afghanistan definitely will be needed for this project. Diverting an international river into the other country is a serious issue.



The chairman of this administrative district meets us here in Sonabad. He answers Howard's questions as we inspect the site. He has also arranged lunch in the village's meeting hall, another excellent traditional Tajik meal. The women who prepared the meal linger outside. I can't but help noticing that nobody touches the bottles of vodka, much to Howard's relief, I'm sure.





We pass numerous mine fields, hold over from the Soviet war in Afghanistan.

Khorog

Our destination for the day is the city of Khorog, administrative center for the Badakhshan autonomous region of Tajikistan. While in Dushanbe, we had to get a separate visa to travel here.

Khorog is a surprisingly large town, very Soviet looking in appearance with large blocks of apartment buildings. The town stretches out along both sides of the Gunt River which flows into the Panj River at this location. All around are the huge, snow covered mountains of the Pamir, home to glaciers as well.

We have rooms booked at the Serena Hotel, a well-known five-star hotel. This one is small; having nine rooms and located on a spectacular overlook of the Panj River. From my room, I have a direct view of the only bridge to Afghanistan on the long stretch of the border we've driven along. Elizabeth says this is the best hotel in Tajikistan and a wonder that it's located in such a remote location. The hotel caters to occasional groups of eco-tourist who go the great expense of coming here to hike in the mountains and look for yaks.



Wednesday, April 19, 2006

We spend a half-morning touring Pamir Energy's hydro plants which are in the process of being upgraded by the Aga Khan Fund. The Fund is also trying to establish an electricity billing and collection system. Seems that the Tajiks are used to the free energy from the communist days, and just don't accept the concept of having to pay for it.

The Fund is experimenting with two approaches. One is to provide a single meter to an entire neighborhood and let the residents enforce payment of the electrical bills or face having the electricity cut off for everyone. The other approach is pre-paid energy cards.



Another surprise is that the Aga Khan Fund gives us a ride in their passenger helicopter that makes the flight between here and Dushanbe twice a week. Around noon, we say goodbye to our two drivers and one of the bodyguards as we walk out to the helicopter for the 90 minute flight back to Dushanbe. They, on the other hand have a fourteen hour drive ahead of them and will arrive back in Dushanbe sometime tomorrow.



The flight takes us directly over the mountains, and we skim the tops of the 24,000 ft high peaks. The cabin isn't pressurized and most of the passengers get drossy from the thin atmosphere. The thin air doesn't bother me and I enjoy the ride and the view of the top of the world!





Thursday, April 20, 2006

This morning we have a final meeting at the Ministry of Energy before heading out to the airport for the flight back to Kabul. We apparently arrive early (8:20 AM) and no one is in except for a secretary. We're directed to a conference room and are served coffee and tea while waiting.

On the wall is a 1920's hand-drawn poster of Russia's ambitious plans to build a series of dams on the Amu Darya and other rivers in Tajikistan. Impressive is both the poster and their plans, but in reality, of all the dams shown on the Amu Darya/Panj River, only two are feasible.



The Deputy Minister shows up about 20 minutes later. Our discussion centers on how to move forward on the Dastijum Dam project. Howard says that the first thing that must happen is a water agreement between the two nations. Without such water agreement, international financing for the dam will not be possible.

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Tuesday, July 24, 2006

12 PM

The Amu Darya and its tributary, the Panj River are fed by the mountains of Afghanistan and Tajikistan, one of the largest rivers in Central Asia. The stretch along the Afghan-Tajik border is underdeveloped, with great potential for hydro power generation and expansion of water supply for both industrial and agriculture.

Plans are being drawn up to create an economic free zone along the Amu Darya, a “Ruhr Valley” that could greatly spur the economic development of both countries. One of the corner stones of these grandiose plans is the Dastijum Dam, the “Hoover Dam” of Central Asia.

But first there must be agreements for sharing and joint development of water resources along the border; first there has to be a dialogue; first there must be an initial mission or visit to get things started.

For the last six weeks, I’ve been working with the US Embassy in Dushanbe to set up the mission, exchanging emails, making phone calls, and having meetings with the Afghans. The delegation will be a small one, lead by the First Deputy Minister for Water, Nezami, and two of his advisors.

1 PM

I’m back from lunch and there is still no word from the Afghans. Arranging this mission to Tajikistan seems like a comedy of errors without any humor. First, it was the official letter of invitation from the Tajik government that never came, delaying the trip for two weeks. Then, last Thursday, the letter was finally faxed to the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), but the letter either was never received or was lost within the ministry.

The letter of invitation is required for the First Deputy Minister, Nezami to get approval from the Afghan government for the visit.

As of yesterday, the letter still hadn’t turned up. I suggested that Nezami have the Afghan MFA contact the Tajiks, or call up the Afghan Embassy in Dushanbe who also

received a copy, or at least check with the Tajik Embassy here to see if they can straighten things out.

No Support or Funding

Then there's the funding problem. In June, USAID agreed to fund the mission as part of their energy program since water agreements are necessary for energy development on the border. Then, after Tom left last month, USAID said no funding because this is water and not energy.

Then, two weeks ago, USAID agreed to pay. But on Sunday, the email came saying that they definitely won't pay.

I remember looking at the email in disbelief, "*They won't pay and wait to tell us today, three days before the trip??*" Ed was noticeably depressed, and offered to pay the airfare for the Afghans out of his own pocket.

My request to the Ambassador here, Neumann for financial support wasn't turned down, it was just ignored. It's as if water is a four letter word here at the embassy and with USAID, like a contagious disease they must avoid at all costs. It's the damnest thing I've ever seen.

2 PM

I finally get a hold of the Afghans. No visas, they say they sent someone down with their passports to the Tajik Embassy, but it was closed. The letter of invitation still hasn't shown up at the Afghan MFA; and no, no one called the Afghan Embassy in Dushanbe or even informed the Tajik MFA.

4:30 pm

It turns out that the Tajik Embassy is not closed after all; they have been opened all day. They did receive the instructions from the Tajik MFA to grant the visas and are prepared to do it anytime today or tonight.

6 PM

There still has been no action on the letter of invitation. Even if we can get a copy of the letter from the Tajik Embassy tonight, it will be impossible to get approval for Nezami's travel in time for the 10 AM flight tomorrow.

The UN only flies to Dushanbe once a week, which means delaying the mission for another week. With no other options, we decide to regroup in the morning, reschedule for next week, and try again.