

Afghan Insurgent Retraining Scheme Fails

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An IWPR investigation has revealed that a retraining programme for former Afghan insurgents in the eastern Paktia province has gone badly wrong.

Of 170,000 US dollars disbursed for the programme, 120,000 is unaccounted for. Local government officials say they identified serious wrongdoing in the project and reported it to their superiors in Kabul, but nothing happened as a result.

The eight-month training project in Sayed Karam, a district of Paktia province, was funded by 250,000 dollars from the Afghan government through the ministry of labour and social affairs, and was launched in May 2012.

A Kabul-based organisation called ROSSA (Reliable Organisation Services for Skills and Education) was contracted to deliver vocational training for 200 men in the district as part of a government drive to provide former insurgents with ways of returning to civilian life, so that they would not be tempted to go back to fighting.

The project proposal, seen by IWPR, shows that ROSSA agreed to run ten vocational courses for the former insurgents to teach them carpentry, tailoring, plumbing, electrical wiring and car engine repair.

Project activities were to get under way after two months' recruitment and preparation time. The students were to receive a stipend of 100 dollars per month, while trainers were to get 300 a month. A further 12,000 dollars was allocated for materials to be used in class.

After attending daily classes over six months, students were to be issued with a set of tools appropriate to their chosen area of work so that they could set themselves up independently. The sum of 20,000 dollars was set aside for this.

The ministry's Paktia department transferred 170,000 dollars to ROSSA at the start of the project, and the remaining 80,000 dollars was withheld by the provincial finance department as a final payment.

IWPR's inquiries indicate that ROSSA only spent 50,000 out of the 170,000 dollar tranche it received up front.

Trainers and trainees went largely unpaid, and the classes lacked practical resources.

One official claims that the participants selected for the course were not drawn from the ranks of former insurgents, but were merely local residents of Sayed Karam.

Niaz Mohammad Karim, the local government head in the Sayed Karam district, told IWPR that he received 20 pages of complaints from both trainers and trainees during the first three months of the project. According to Karim, all the claims boiled down to the same thing - in his words, that "there's nothing to this course except corruption".

IWPR has seen copies of all of these letters of complaint.

"There was so much corruption in this organisation that the trainees and trainers were not even paid their fees," Karim said.

In July 2012, Karim reported the allegations to the regional department of the labour and social affairs and economy ministries as well as to the Paktia governor's office, and asked for the courses to be stopped.

"The activity of the ROSSA courses is not transparent," he wrote in all three letters. "The trainees are not being paid, there are no materials in the classrooms, the organisation's employees are not at work, and there is no work plan for the trainees and trainers. These courses in Sayed Karam should be suspended as soon as possible."

In response to Karim's request, Paktia governor Juma Khan Hamdard sent the provincial labour and social affairs department a clear instruction in September 2012, saying, "Following complaints from residents of Sayed Karam, the ten courses in the district should be postponed."

On Hamdard's orders, the labour and social affairs department instructed ROSSA to suspend its activities, but it says the NGO failed to comply.

Abdul Samad Mosleh, the director of labour and social affairs for Paktia, acknowledged that his department had failed to monitor the vocational scheme properly.

"When we closed the courses, the organisation's employees reopened them illegally," he said.

Mosleh said that when he went to Sayed Karam to interview both trainers and trainees, "I saw with my own eyes that there were no tools and no raw materials in these courses for the trainees to do the practical exercises."

He reported his findings to his superiors at the Kabul ministry of labour and social affairs, but no action was taken.

Asked why his own department had not taken steps to deal with the problem, he said, "We do not have an executive arm like the police that could drag the organisation here and tell it to pay the trainees in full."

"It was the organisation's employees who carried out theft and corruption, not our agency," he added.

The economy ministry is responsible for monitoring the activities of NGOs, and its provincial head Mahfuz Ahmad, told IWPR that he agreed that massive corruption had taken place.

Ahmad said that when he realised he had been sent fake documentation, his department asked the head ministry in Kabul to take legal action against ROSSA

But "since Kabul did not take action, I too remained silent".

IWPR spoke to six trainers who all described a lack of resources and problems with wage payments.

Mohammadullah, a trainer engaged to teach carpentry skills, said he was given neither raw materials nor adequate tools to work with.

"I did the training with two chisels and two hammers," he said, adding, "Believe me, we didn't even have one nail."

Gol Mohammad, who ran a car mechanics course for 20 of the trainees, said that he only managed to get 100 dollars in wages from ROSSA after making repeated complaints to local government chief Karim.

Ahmad and Mosleh told IWPR that the trainees had not been selected from the ranks of former insurgents who had joined the peace process – the whole point of the training plan.

"To be honest, they didn't do this," Mosleh said. "The truth is, we had no authority over the organisation."

IWPR interviewed a sample of 18 trainees out of a total of 200, and all of them said the courses had been so poorly managed that they had been a waste of time.

Najibullah, 18, from the village of Kandarkhel, spent six months on the electricians' course but said he learnt nothing due to the lack of tools.

Another trainee, Wahidullah, studying carpentry, said that for several months the trainer had been equipped with nothing more than a chisel and a hammer.

IWPR made six attempts to interview ROSSA's director, Dr Romal, at the NGO's head office in Kabul, but was told each time that he was too busy.

After he was shown some of the documents gathered by IWPR detailing the alleged misspending, Romal instructed a staff member called Mujiburrahman to give the interview instead.

Mujiburrahman acknowledged that money had been stolen from the project, but said it was not the management's fault.

"We accept that the wages of 200 trainees and ten trainers were not paid by ROSSA for several months, and the necessary equipment and materials were not been purchased," he said, before explaining that this was because the money had been stolen by two ROSSA employees.

When ROSSA's head office found out about the theft, he said, they immediately sacked the culprits, whom he declined to name.

Mujiburrahman also accused government officials in Paktia of spreading defamatory rumours about the project. This, he said, happened after ROSSA refused to pay them kickbacks in return for them reporting back to central government that the project had been a success.

Asked why he would not name the officials concerned, Mujiburrahman said that if he did so, the project would suffer further harm, and would not receive the remaining 80,000 dollars currently held by the

regional finance department.

Mujiburrahman acknowledged there had been complaints about the courses, but said that there was never a guarantee that a training scheme could be delivered completely to plan.

"Our project was not a shop to produce and sell materials," he added.

Sahil Mangal is an IWPR-trained reporter in Paktia, Afghanistan.

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