

## **Treacherous Afghan Roads**

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The authorities' botched attempt to get the Salang open for traffic does not bode well for the rest of the country's shattered road network.

The troubled re-opening of the famous Salang tunnel has highlighted the dire state of Afghanistan's transport system.

One hundred kilometres north of the capital Kabul, the world's highest tunnel was opened to traffic in January for the first time in nearly a decade, providing a vital connection between the north and south of the country.

It had been hoped that the clearing of the tunnel, partially destroyed by the Northern Alliance forces in the early Nineties, would accelerate the international aid effort to regions otherwise inaccessible during the winter months. But the sight of lorries piled high with grain and stranded in the snow has become an all too common sight.

One of the main problems is that there are no adequate safeguards against the effects of heavy snowfall, which seems odd for a tunnel standing over 4000 m above sea level.

This oversight became apparent late last month when hundreds of people were trapped in the Salang and four died from the effects of cold. There was no equipment on the scene to dig the victims out. "There is only one snow-clearing tractor at the northern entrance of the tunnel and that never has enough fuel," said bus driver Momen Shah.

The local authorities said the problem was out of their hands. "If central government doesn't give us the money we require to make the tunnel safe, then what can we do," an official said.

A greater tragedy was averted by the intervention of international peacekeepers and NGOs who came to the rescue.

The authorities must ensure that the Salang is secure, as it is a major route for food convoys supplying remote villages hardest hit by three years of drought.

In better times, the Soviet-built tunnel provided the shortest and safest all-weather route between the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif and Kabul. Slicing through the Hindu Kush mountains, it cuts 200 km off an otherwise torturous journey.

It has also been a strategically important conduit since it opened in 1964. Back in 1979, Soviet army used it to invade the country, and then in the early Nineties the late Northern Alliance commander, Ahmed Shah Masood, made it impassable to prevent Taleban troops advancing on his stronghold in the north of the country.

The Salang is just one piece of a dilapidated transportation infrastructure. The poor state of Afghan roads is evident everywhere, with many of the inter-city routes virtually unusable. If you drive up the cratered and potholed north-south highway, you pass the stumps and ruins of bridges destroyed during the war.

Some of these are the remains of the one-time famous bridges of Matak, Jabal us Saraj, Tajikan, Qalatak and Olang. And for the north-south highway to be of any real practical use, these need to be rebuilt. So far, funding has not been made available for this purpose. Their temporary replacements provide a perilous alternative for heavy goods and passenger vehicles.

There's also the constant threat posed by robbers. With the end of the war, many former combatants have turned to crime to make a living. A good part of their money is made holding up travelers who are easy prey. The problem is such that there have been calls for the multi-national peace force to secure the road network, but no progress on this issue has been made.

In previous times, when the roads were considered too dangerous because of security fears, people could at least fly. However, the country's only airline, Ariana, is currently restricted to one flight a week to Herat, for which hundreds of people queue daily to get tickets. "We've been waiting weeks for a flight, but wouldn't risk traveling by road because we've already been robbed once," said Ghulam Mahboob Hamidi, at Kabul airport.

Ensuring that the road network functions properly must be a government priority, as economic progress and social stability is dependent on people being able to move around the country freely.

Daoud Shibil is the pseudonym of a Kabul-based Afghan journalist

**Location:** Afghanistan

**Focus:** Центральная  
Азия

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