

## Diary Entry 1

**The following diary entries are Ron Hamilton's personal observations, musings and thoughts while commissioned by the World Bank to review governance and monitoring in the Strategic Grain Reserve in Kabul during 2012**

My third trip to Kabul was somewhat unexpected. I had long given up being asked to advise on implementing the governance and monitoring reforms I had recommended to the World Bank in 2009. Initially, the work was postponed because of the Presidential elections and then, later, the confused aftermath of the election. Oddly, the issues reactivated in late 2011 and I was asked to comment on legislative revisions and related structural issues. I was happy to do so.

But this trip, in July 2012, was for a completely new reason. I was asked to be one of two advisers in the setting up of a new organisation for the management of the Strategic Grain Reserve. From the brief, it promised to be challenging as I knew, from past work with the Afghanistan ministries, they were very bureaucratic and, as in some countries, Minister-dominated.

And so, on 6 July, I set out to discover Kabul anew.

The following comments are based on my daily diary.

*It was a mighty 'if', of course, but funny things happen north of the Khyber... Flashman at the Charge, p.209, Pan edition, 5th printing, 1979.*

### 6 July

As he drove to the airport on Wednesday, Craig (Corporate Cabs 257) extolled the virtues of Dubai as a vacation venue. Perhaps. I noticed that, as I struggled to find the departure hall after leaving Dubai Arrivals, there were still dust-covered abandoned cars in the airport car park. However, it is from above that Craig's description has to be questioned. The overwhelming perspective is beige. I don't mean it in the Billy Connolly way but in the range of colour from the air. Buildings are beige. Even the sealed roads are dark beige. The only bit of colour was the blue train set – commenced operating since my last visit – weaving through the city. As we gained height, the beige became desert and then haze.

It was a relief to be on the way again.

Because Singapore Airlines do not have an interline agreement with SAFI Air, it was again necessary to exit through Immigration to claim my bag and to find my way to the Departure Hall. From experience, I knew there was no internal connection to the Hall and I had to struggle in the heat across the car park to the Departure area. And, as the desk was not

open, I retreated to a large, cavernous food hall to spend the time when the SAFI desk would open.

Eight hours after arriving from Singapore, I boarded the SAFI flight and headed to Kabul.

The beige lasted for the first couple of hours. And then Afghanistan started to appear.

Unlike past trips, I found I wasn't so anticipatory. I worried that I was taking the trip for granted. I wasn't even worried about not having a visa. But then the scenery started to take shape. On our left (port) windows I caught glimpses of snow-covered mountains. And then started thinking about the war that was going on in and around them. One side, at least, being people holding extreme and anti-west views. "Hm!" I thought. "Perhaps my in-flight book, "Meadows" – about the kidnap of the tourists in the Kashmir – wasn't a wise choice." (I do have Kindle on my iPad but they are less convenient). Pakul-wearing persons may be more than literary critics. I recalled a warning about a Mau Mau novel in my first landing in Africa. I turned the cover away from view. But I digress. I wished I had my camera out, though not sure about aerial photography and iPhones were banned "even when set in aeroplane mode". And so, depend on my memory for my "photos".

Desert gave way to sandy valleys. I could see the barest thread of a sealed highway. Undulations provided faint shadows. There seemed to be no settlements, initially. As the hills became sharper and higher, erosion was a major feature. But still beige was the predominant colour. I couldn't see how anyone could hide from Soviet helicopters during the occupation. Or the bad guys can hide from the Coalition, today.

You will gather that I am trying for detail to help my mind's eye remember as much as I can. Less for the reader than for me. Even from the air, the small hills cum peaks, looked high. Surprisingly, the odd cliff face seemed to have tracks or roads. Skippers' Pinchers Bluff in large, is my best comparison. Not roads I would like to try, recalling some of roads we had to use in Tibet, en route from Everest. In the distance, more snow tipped mountains could be seen. In my first trip I expressed a wish to see them and was told, "Sorry! Not good places to go."

As with previous flights, many of the passengers were men. Short hair cuts or shaven heads, desert boots, t-shirts and jeans. In short, men who worked as security guards.

As we approached Kabul, signs of settlement increased. Small villages, more roads – mainly unsealed. Then the dam, which the UK forces have been protecting. A few streams and a river or two. Oddly, no green to be seen along the river banks. But the stone-walled fields had pockets of green. But the outskirts of Kabul was an amazing suburb of neatly laid out buildings – some as big as hangars – and more oil tankers, container trucks and containers than I have ever seen in the one place. Just a huge industrial and transport complex. Looked to cover an area at least as large as, say, Lower Hutt.

Landing at the Kabul airport, it was as though we had landed in a large military base. The number of aircraft had multiplied hugely since my last visit. More helicopters than I could poke a stick at. Many C 130s. And a fleet of aircraft I must ask Malc about – two engines – some prop, some jets, all mounted high on the junctions of wing and fuselage.

Immigration was no faster or slower than anywhere else. (Dubai was a shocker in queuing time.) I noted that most of the women on the flight were not wearing head scarves. A bit of a bump when it was my turn at the desk. I wasn't surprised that the desk man called for supervisors as he said, quizzically, "No visa?" I agreed with this observation and gestured at the documents the Bank had sent. There was much muttering and I was led away to fill in a piece of paper. And then sent to the baggage hall with a "Immigration office on Saturday". And my passport disappeared. As I write this (0600) I am still calm about the situation, Hysterics will commence on Saturday if it turns out that my passport has been sold to some smuggler or gun-runner. I should add that the people in the Bank's administration seem equally calm. Perhaps they hope, as Steph has prophesied, they will join me for Christmas in Kabul. It could play hell with my Samoan assignment, though.

In the Bank car, a young woman I had met in the Minister's office was waiting. She has now joined the Bank and we trundled through narrow side streets, to her Guest House. It was all vaguely familiar and if I mention to Leith that the streets to her old home in Addis Ababa were similar, she would immediately envisage huge pot-holes. In this case, the high walls tended to be anti-blast packs, as well as concrete block. I seemed to recognise many of the guards from previous trips, as I was escorted into the Bank and IMF compound. I have a guest room in the latter.

There was the usual security briefing for new arrivals. It was pointed out that we are in a "safe" part of town. It was considered unlikely as a target area. However, it is now dubious that I will get to the USAF bazaar – this has been denied since the attack on the US Embassy. On the plus side, we are allowed to some bars and restaurants. I was issued with the usual two-way radio and cell phone, and shown to a range of panic rooms. These are slowly being equipped with items to make staying

there more comfortable. They were occupied for eight hours, during the attack on the US Embassy.

The day finished with a lively discussion over the dinner table. Mainly about the institutions I have been brought here to work on. My task now seems big! Oh yes, my old friend, the "housie caller" is still operating at the nearby mosque.

**Friday.** Everyone seems to be sleeping including my air con. My room looks out to a lawn and a courtyard that has old grape vines around two sides. It is overlooked by high tennis-court like screens – said to be "splatter screens". A very high, incomplete building towers over one side. Today's peace may not be so when the business week resumes tomorrow.



My room in the IMF compound



Camp Hammers is in the centre.

