

## Mobiles, SMS play a role in Afghanistan security

Ken Banks, IDG News

*The October 7th, 2001 invasion of Afghanistan didn't only mark the beginning of the "War on Terror". It also paved way for the introduction of the first mobile phone networks into the country, networks which today find themselves pawns in a game of cat-and-mouse between the Taleban, the government, security forces, mobile operators and aid agencies working to improve the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.*

Afghanistan is rarely out of the headlines. Just yesterday news broke of [three women aid workers and their driver being killed near Kabul](#), demonstrating in the most graphic terms imaginable the huge dangers faced by so many NGOs working there. Decades of invasion, war and fighting has run the country ragged. There can be fewer more dangerous places on earth to work. As recently as July 2008, the [Crime and Safety Report](#) described the security situation as remaining "volatile and unpredictable":

*"No part of Afghanistan should be considered immune from violence, and the potential exists throughout the country for hostile acts, either targeted or random, against American and other western nationals at any time. There is an on-going threat to kidnap and assassinate U.S. citizens and non-governmental organization (NGO) workers throughout the country. Afghan authorities have a limited ability to maintain order and ensure the security of the citizens and visitors"*

In such a challenging and hostile environment, non-profit organisations (NGOs) rightly spend considerable amounts of time and effort doing everything they can to limit their exposure to risk. With improved communication often at the heart of any security strategy, many have turned to the growing influence and availability of mobile phone networks in the areas where they operate, and to tools which give them the potential to communicate quickly, widely, efficiently and effectively.

Within months of the US-led invasion in late 2001, the first Afghan mobile networks began to appear. Today, Afghanistan has four privately-owned networks and, according to a recent report by the [BBC](#), mobile phones are the "only way most Afghans are able to communicate, especially in remote areas where they are used to summon medical help or contact relatives". The importance of mobile technology hasn't gone un-noticed by the Taleban either, who have recently been [destroying towers](#) in an attempt to stop security forces using the technology to co-ordinate night-time attacks against them. That particular game of cat-and-mouse continues.

Facing a continued and growing security threat, in January 2007 a major international humanitarian organisation (who shall remain anonymous for obvious reasons) began using [FrontlineSMS](#) as a field communication solution in their Afghan operations. FrontlineSMS is free software which allows for two-way group text messaging (SMS) using a laptop computer and an attached mobile phone. This makes it particularly useful in situations where messages need to be communicated quickly and in a co-ordinated

fashion. Following the [attacks](#) yesterday, FrontlineSMS kicked into action and, according to the Afghan NGO:

*"...FrontlineSMS was essential for us getting the word out quickly. E-mail was down, voice was spotty but SMS still worked. We also had two female staff at a school near the incident and were able to tell them to stay put till things quietened down. All my staff made it home safe today"*

Today the Windows version of FrontlineSMS is in daily use in their main operations room, while the newer Mac version is kept as a backup by a senior Security Officer. The software is primarily used to quickly pass time-sensitive security information to staff in the field via SMS:

*"Drivers receive updates on traffic congestion, road blocks, police operations, VIP movements, local minor security incidents and anything else that might be useful as they travel. Senior staff receive SMS messages regarding larger security incidents that may require them to modify program activities for the short term. Incidents that influence activities in other areas are sent to the sub-office group. Finally we have an 'All Staff' category for those situations where we need to notify or account for everyone as quickly as possible"*

The increasing use of mobile technology by humanitarian organisations reflects a growing recognition of the significance of communications in the wider effort to promote security and democracy in the country. As far back as 2003 the "Rebuild, Reconnect, Reunite" initiative highlighted the important role of telecommunications in the preparation and running of national elections, not to mention the wider efforts of Afghan security and police forces in their battle to re-establish rule of law in the regions.

Problems of coverage and reliability remain – something which shouldn't come as a huge surprise considering the attacks on mobile infrastructure – but mobile phones are beginning to establish themselves, and communication across the country is, on the whole, improving. In the past few years alone the number of Afghans with access to a phone has increased by a factor of five.

As more phones begin to get into more hands, non-profit activity will increase. However, the wider use of mobile technology in health, education and other economic empowerment initiatives will only flourish once the fundamental problem of security is addressed. After all, NGOs need workers, and workers need to be kept safe.

Mobile phones won't solve the security problem alone, but they clearly have a significant role to play.

*Ken Banks devotes himself to the application of mobile technology for positive social and environmental change in the developing world, and has spent the last 15 years working on projects in Africa. Recently, his research resulted in the development of FrontlineSMS, a field communication system designed to empower grassroots non-profit organisations. Ken graduated from Sussex University with honours in Social Anthropology with Development Studies and currently divides his time between Cambridge (UK) and Stanford University in California on a MacArthur Foundation-funded Fellowship. Further details of Ken's wider work are available on his website at [www.kiwanja.net](http://www.kiwanja.net)*