

Rebuilding Afghanistan: A Field Trip

Poonam Mann

“ Think of Afghanistan and a plethora of images whiz past the mind’s eye . Friendly *kabuliwalas* doling out *kishmish*, *badam* and *pista* by the handful to cherubic children; the famed Khyber Pass and the heavily traded Silk-Route spelling prosperity; handsome and passionate Afghans brandishing swords to protect their honour and a land where legends and folklore designate it a fairy tale status”.¹ However, today the ground reality has changed dramatically and so have perceptions at the international level. The country today is a picture of devastation and its ongoing struggle for modernity. After almost twenty five years of civil war and militia-rule, Afghanistan has embarked on the road to recovery. In the past four years much progress has been made, yet much more remains to be done.

A recent visit to Afghanistan was an opportunity to see for oneself the process of change at close quarters and get a better understanding of the following aspects:

- The security situation;
- The nature and visible destruction of urban and rural infrastructure;
- The ongoing reconstruction work;
- The role of warlords in the current context;
- Public opinion regarding the US presence;
- Public opinion regarding elections.

As the plane descended over the Hindukush mountains and landed at Kabul airport, one could see the wreckage of planes and buildings in ruin. Parts of Kabul still wear a bomb-ravaged look, especially areas around Darulam palace, where India is to build the Afghan Parliament. The countryside – agricultural fields, irrigation canals, grazing areas - is still littered with mines and though the UN and HALO Trust are working

round the clock on demining the country, this massive task could take them 10-15 years to complete.

The security situation remains fragile. Incidents of bombing and kidnapping are a regular feature. Most staff of international agencies continues to live under restrictions; and yet they seem to be working hard to put the country back on track. The efforts towards rebuilding Afghanistan are being hampered by a variety of factors:

- a) **Lack of Governance** – The Government of Afghanistan has been recently formed but its writ does not run in many areas outside Kabul, where it is mostly confined to the cities. The absence of governance accounts for numerous problems. The government is unable to take the lead in deciding inter se priority of development projects, for example, which road is important?, which school should be built first? In most cases the government acts as a mere facilitator, routing requests from villages to the donors. The lack of an effective judicial system also hinders aid and development work as there is no legal recourse for recovery of bad debt where contractual obligations remain unfulfilled.
- b) **Warlords** - Afghanistan has been ruled by warlords for most of its 25 years of war. Even now, they control much of the countryside. The people are dependent on warlords for their protection and welfare. This dependency makes the warlords more powerful than the government in many parts of Afghanistan.
- c) **North-South Divide** - There is a growing feeling among the people of northern provinces that the southern provinces are getting more developmental aid. Province wise data is not available to support this perception. However, the large number of projects being implemented by major donors in the northern provinces, which, are relatively more stable, appear to get lower priority in resource allocation than the troublesome southern provinces.
- d) **Attitude of the People**- Given grave social and political uncertainties, people seem to focus on short-term gains. Since most of them live on the edge, making quick money seems to be the order of the day. This would appear rational in an economy, which has been in doldrums for the past 25 years. However, greed and corruption abound among the people who approach life as if there were no tomorrow, and development work suffers.

- e) **Natural disasters** - The country is prone to natural disasters. After 10 years of drought, rainfall this year has exceeded the long-term average. Unfortunately, with water storage facilities in disrepair due to lack of maintenance for the past 10 years, rains flooded most parts of the country.
- f) **Literacy** - At about 80 per cent people illiterate, Afghans have the lowest literacy rates in the world. This had led to acute shortage of engineers, doctors, teachers and other technicians needed to help rebuild the country. The few literate and technically qualified people that the country had, migrated abroad during the years of war, making the shortage even more acute.
- g) **Opium production** - Opium is grown as a cash crop. It has remained in constant demand. Years of drought and political and economic uncertainty acted as a strong incentive for growing opium. Initiatives by donor countries like the UK & US to lure away farmers from poppy cultivation have had a significant impact in some areas, particularly in the Gandhak valley in Bamyan.
- h) **Elections** - The elections to the provincial council and the parliament on the 18th of September have generated an encouraging response from the people and the number of contesting candidates. The elections have been largely peaceful. The candidates were mostly warlords, a large number of them desired to be responsible leaders and were thus serious contenders. The condition that warlords surrender their weapons before their candidature is approved, looks sensible on paper but difficult to implement. Eleven candidates were disqualified for the September elections initially. Subsequently, another 20 or so candidates (said to be warlords) were barred from the elections. This disqualification at a belated stage may have undesirable consequences.
- j) **US Presence** - The US works closely with many non-governmental and international organisations to help rebuild Afghanistan. It is also a key player along with its coalitional partners and with the Afghan government in coordinating plans to neutralize the remnants of Al Qaida and the Taliban and bring overall stability. A large number of Americans in Afghanistan comprise of personnel from Army Civil Affairs and Special Operation as well as officials from the State Department and USAID. The US has been

categorical in its assertion that it would continue to stay in Afghanistan till reconstruction work is complete and at present most Afghans appear to be happy with its presence. This may not, however, continue for long.

However, overall, the outlook seems positive. The past four years in Afghanistan have seen a lot of development taken place. Telecommunications have registered significant progress. Most cities now have mobile connectivity. The road network has improved. Schools and clinics are being built every day. However, the problem is so huge that it will require determined and sustained efforts to overcome years of destruction and negligence.

In a meeting, the Governor of Bamiyan, Mrs Habiba Sorabi, expressed the view that the donors were not paying enough attention to the Central Highlands in particular and the northern region in general. This, she felt, was helping shape a perception that only if there was trouble, the region would get attention and aid. This accounts for the fact that development is in dribs and drabs and not proceeding at a sustained pace as required. People in the north are, however, genuinely happy with the international donor agencies' presence, as they provide employment and opportunities.

A Role For India

Hindustan -Afghanistan –Dost, (India and Afghanistan are friends) is a popular chant in Kabul. People are indeed very friendly, particularly towards Indians. Indian films, music and actors are very popular. Afghans appreciate the Indian warmth and hospitality having experienced it during their visits to India for education or medical treatment. Both countries have a shared history, many common traditions and enduring cultural ties and traditional bonds of friendship, which, unfortunately, were ruptured during the Taliban regime.

To revive its traditionally close ties with Afghanistan, India has responded by enlarging its diplomatic presence and stepping up its economic assistance. Its contribution, to the development of transport, aviation, power, telecommunication, education and health sectors has been noteworthy.

India's active involvement has a strong rationale. A prosperous Afghanistan is essential for peace and stability of the region as whole. India

is justifiably keen to ensure that the country does not become a springboard for terrorism and remains free from anti-Indian elements.

Given Afghanistan's geo-strategic relevance and India's own interest a much greater effort is required to help rebuild and stabilize Afghanistan. This effort may include among others the following measures:

- India should increase its visibility in Afghanistan. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit in August 2005 was significant in this respect. There is need for more such high profile visits;
- All agreements that India has signed with Afghanistan need to be effectively implemented;
- Since India cannot compete with major powers like, the US, UK, Japan in terms of aid, it should, therefore, chart out its own unique approach. It should identify projects that are close to the hearts of the Afghan people. The parliament construction project is a significant addition to India's contribution to Afghanistan's rehabilitation. Symbolically, it represents India's respect for democracy. Since the people of Afghanistan feel culturally close to India, the effort should be to build some cultural, educational, and scientific institutions that would have a long- term impact on Afghanistan. Music concerts and Bollywood nights not only provide entertainment but have a wider impact on Afghan society.
- People to People contacts can be deepened by deployment of Indian doctors, teachers, technicians and social workers. It would be desirable for government to encourage such deployment.

References/End Notes

1. Taru Bahl, "Reconstructing Afghanistan" <http://www.blonnet.com/life/2002/07/29/stories/20020729/60100.htm>

Dr Poonam Mann is a Researcher at IDSA.