

Afghanistan: Year-End 2002 - Tenuous Nation Building

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Middle-aged Haji Khair Muhammad continues 20/01/2003

ISLAMABAD, 20 January (IRIN) - Middle-aged Haji Khair Muhammad continues to assist his anthropologist-turned-politician brother, Hakim Taniwal in governing one of the most unruly places on earth, Khost in southeastern Afghanistan. Although a tribal leader, he has all the responsibilities of a statesman ranging from rebuilding the ruins of houses, schools and roads to maintaining a fragile peace between rival tribesmen. "This year heralds a fine new beginning for Afghanistan," he told IRIN from Khost.

"There is peace now and we have made significant progress in improving the living conditions of our people," he said. Although last year for months his brother was prevented from occupying the governor's mansion in Khost by another warlord Badshah Khan Zadran, Muhammad remains optimistic. "You will see that how quickly everything changes this year.

Last year was just a beginning," he added. But such confidence may be premature. The governor's brother and other optimists believe Afghanistan has a bright future, pointing to the return of some two million Afghan refugees and the return of three million Afghan children to school.

Others are less positive. Many point to the fact that there is virtual warlord rule outside Kabul and highlight the sporadic fighting, sabotage, the resumption of the poppy cultivation and heightened ethnic tensions as signs of returning anarchy. Regional experts are still cautious. "The last year has been a year where things have calmed down a little bit and some basic institutional frameworks have been put in place which are still quite fragile," Barnett Rubin, Director of Studies with the Centre on International Cooperation at New York University, told IRIN. "Some rehabilitation has started but it's too much to say that any fundamental economic changes have taken place."

According to a recent World Bank report, an estimated seven million people remain vulnerable and face the risk of famine. More than 70 percent of schools need repairs along with most of the nation's road network. Health concerns include the fact that life expectancy stands at 44 years, one of the lowest in the world.

SECURITY

Security remains of paramount concern in Afghanistan, but different parties have differing perspectives. "When the US military talks about it, they are talking about the number of attacks by Taliban and Al-Qaeda on them and on the government forces. Of course, other people mean the security of the Afghan people," Rubin explained. "It appears that the former kind of security is on the whole improving with the US military saying that there are only six provinces that have security problems," he said, adding that Afghans feel insecure because nothing much has been done to curtail the power of regional warlords.

Although Kabul is policed by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the 4,800 strong Turkish-led UN mandated force, little security exists for ordinary Afghans outside of the capital. Despite a much-publicised effort at creating a new Afghan National Army, warlords and their gunmen continue to control the countryside.

With two ministers assassinated in Kabul and an unsuccessful attempt on President Karzai's life in his southern home town, Kandahar, last September, security at best remained tenuous for ordinary Afghans. Many

aid workers and UN offices were also attacked over the past year. In 2002, the central government was unable to deploy security forces in most of the country and the training of the national army fell critically behind, lacking money and expertise. Regional commanders fought with each other in the west and north and allegedly committed human rights abuses against local populations. The discovery of a number of mass graves in the north reopened debate on war crimes and led to calls for investigations.

In southern Afghanistan, the trade in illicit drugs continued to grow while in the east and southern border areas, anti-government forces grew in strength and threatened both Afghanistan's leaders and international military forces, leaving some aid agencies concerned.

"The international community should acknowledge that the security vacuum in Afghanistan will not resolve itself and requires urgent international attention," a report published in January, 2003 by the CARE international NGO said.

With the US military planning to deploy seven joint civil military teams to assist in the reconstruction effort in regional centres outside Kabul, aid agencies fear the politicisation of humanitarian aid and continue the call for the expansion of ISAF outside Kabul. According to Nigel Fisher, the UN Secretary General's Deputy Special Representative for Reconstruction, the world body had always advocated for the expansion of ISAF beyond Kabul and would continue to do so in the future. "This would certainly be welcomed by ordinary Afghans as a clear evidence of the continued commitment of the international community to their security and well being," he told IRIN from Kabul.

Fisher added that such an expansion would contain human rights abuses, reduce the continuing low level violence and possibly help negotiate disarmament of militias and reconciliation.

Over the past year, there had been many attacks on ISAF too. However, officers remain adamant that security is stabilising. "If you compare Kabul to what it was like one year ago, I think we have come a long way, and it is safer," a spokesman for the Turkish ISAF, Capt Mufit Yilmaz, told IRIN from Kabul. "Our men are on the streets, and ISAF is making efforts to ensure that Afghans and foreigners are safe in this city," he added. The government, also remains optimistic. "You cannot expect security to be perfect after 23 years of war and bloodshed," presidential spokesman, Syed Fazle Akbar told IRIN from Kabul. "Despite the difficulties and daunting challenges, security is definitely improving," he said, adding that Afghans were willing to maintain peace because they were exhausted from war and fighting. He cited examples of remote areas outside the capital where people were slowly building a lasting peace in line with their traditions and aspirations.

RECONSTRUCTION

The year began with US \$5 billion being pledged for the reconstruction of the country including \$1.8 billion for 2002 alone, at a major donor conference in Tokyo in January. Although many major reconstruction projects had begun towards the end of the year, the majority of the population are living in poverty that dropped below the pre-war 1976 levels, with aid agencies complaining about pledges not being met.

By the end of 2002, delivery of donors contributions had just about attained commitments made for the year at Tokyo. While some \$650 million were channelled through UN agencies for small scale initial recovery efforts, macro-reconstruction projects such as roads, energy and power were slower in happening because they needed detailed feasibility studies, which were only initiated after the Loya Jirga in June.

"Tokyo pledges have largely been met, but the fundamental problem is that those pledges fall far short of the level of international assistance required to really kick-start Afghanistan's recovery," Fisher maintained. "In per capita terms, the assistance provided to Afghanistan falls far short of aid provided for recovery from other major crises - in the Balkans, East Timor or Rwanda," he

added. But some analysts are more outspoken. "A lot of time was wasted last year because the international community did not live up to its commitments to deliver aid for reconstruction and for greater security," regional expert and writer, Ahmed Rashid, told IRIN. "With these two things missing, president Karzai was not in a position to fulfil his side of the bargain which was to reign in the warlords, start reconstruction and begin institution building," he added.

"The situation in Afghanistan is paradoxical with the humanitarian assistance still very much needed, but it is not a substitute for reconstruction and development assistance," Rubin explained. Last year also saw a flood of Afghans returning to their country and communities. According to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as the year drew to a close, more than two million Afghan refugees and displaced people returned from neighbouring states and camps inside Afghanistan in one of the largest repatriation efforts in decades.

Of the two million returnees, more than 1.5 million returned from Pakistan, followed by about 300,000 from Iran. A further 1,000 Afghans returned from Central Asian states, however repatriation levels have dropped significantly since the onset of winter. Some 250,000 Afghans returned to their places of origin from displacement camps across Afghanistan. In addition, 200,000 rejoined their original communities without any assistance. This huge influx of returnees forced much of the resources to be geared towards humanitarian assistance such as shelter and food aid - leaving little for reconstruction, Rubin argued.

This massive return placed a heavy burden on the nearly non-existent infrastructure in the country. "Clearly this challenge of absorption still remains, while we expect over a million more returnees in 2003, as well as continued return home of IDPs [internally displaced people]," Fisher said, adding that millions of the most vulnerable still required food aid so food for work and school feeding programmes would increase this year. "This indicates that a transition towards recovery mode is beginning," he maintained.

Although the Afghan economy has not changed into a peace economy from a war economy characterised by drugs and smuggling, the World Bank has broadly commended the government's reconstruction strategy and efforts to stimulate the private sector. With donors pledging 1.2 billion for 2003, major efforts at reconstruction and expanding security are widely expected to begin in the spring.

With an 80 percent harvest last year, recovery in agriculture, the economic backbone of the country, has begun. Shelter, especially for millions of displaced and returning refugees remained another major humanitarian concern over the past year. "The 2002-2003 emergency winter programme still has to cover over two million people who are most vulnerable to the cold, isolation and hunger. But compared with last winter, when over 6 million people were in this category, we are in much better shape," Fisher said.

With dozens of people - many of them children, killed or maimed every month by landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO), the issue also remains close to the top of the country's humanitarian agenda. According to Fisher, the UN Mine Action programme was geared up in the last 12 months. With over 7,000 mostly Afghan workers the demining teams were working in surveying, clearance and awareness programmes.

The UN's Mine Action Program for Afghanistan (MAPA) identified 723 sq. km of land as being mine-affected, and has assessed 344 sq. km of the land as being a high priority for clearance. In the first quarter of 2002, mine clearance organisations cleared 23,825,661 sq metres of high priority mine and UXO contaminated land. In addition, another 33 million sq metres have been returned to various communities for productive use.

In a country the size of Texas, reconstruction of roads and buildings remain only one aspect of the mammoth task ahead. Rebuilding Afghan society and laying foundations for a stable state with functioning institutions is crucial too. The country has been devastated by decades of war leaving an empty shell with no infrastructure, no legal system, no health system, no education system, no banking system, to name but a few.

"So far much has not been done in this regard. This is unfortunate and a big mistake on the part of

anyone who has a stake in Afghanistan's stability," Helena Malikyar, a researcher with the Afghanistan reconstruction project at New York University, told IRIN from Kabul. However, she suggested that things were now slowly changing. "It seems that everyone in Kabul today is beginning to re-evaluate the past year and are trying to correct the past mistakes and redesign their reconstruction and development efforts," she said. Malikyar suggested that fighting corruption and paying serious attention to the issues of security remained crucial to reconstruction.

Commenting on the pace of reconstruction this year, Fisher explained that the prospects remained encouraging with resources for major projects coming on line but greatly increased levels of investment were urgently needed. "In 2003, the assistance community is placing increased emphasis on extending aid to outlying provinces and communities. There is a real role for UN agencies to join forces in communities of return and in areas of high food insecurity, to achieve the impact that only collaborative effort can attain," he said.

He added that this year they would also see a number of national labour-intensive public works schemes enabling tens of thousands of Afghans to earn cash that they could use to rebuild homes, regenerate local communities and stimulate local economic activity. "But of course an overriding factor will be the extent to which security improves in the country - and that is still in the balance," he maintained.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Despite the fall of the brutal Taliban more than a year ago, human rights abuses in Afghanistan continue as well as evidence of past atrocities becoming public. "There is a turnaround from the past, but there are also linkages from the past," the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary executions, Asma Jahangir, told IRIN.

"The situation of extrajudicial killings has dramatically decreased, but the culture of impunity has not gone away," she said, adding that there was a prevailing fear and Afghans were asking for justice. "They are saying that if there is a change, it must include justice and an end to impunity."

A Newsweek story in August, 2002 made public the grim details of the killing of hundreds of Taliban and Al-Qaeda prisoners of war near Sheberghan in the north and the international media also reported the discovery of more mass graves - many of them probably victims of the Taliban. Many reports from the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) highlighted the plight of ethnic Pashtuns in northern Afghanistan after local warlord militias started their persecution following the fall of the majority ethnic Pashtun Taliban. Jahangir called for an international investigation into the large-scale human rights abuses over the past 23 years of violence in Afghanistan after her visit to the country last October.

According to Sima Samar, the head of Afghanistan's independent Human Rights Commission, the situation improved last year but much remained to be done. "After 23 years of war, human rights were still better last year but it was not the way we want," she told IRIN from Kabul. However,

she maintained that women's rights remained of particular concern over the past year. "The women in this country should be taken as human beings and normal citizens. Why should there be difference between men and women?" she said. Given Afghanistan's long violent past, building an emancipated human rights future in the country remains a daunting challenge. "We need systems, first of all, law and order, and accountability to improve the human rights in the future," she said. "We have to take actions. All the Afghans have to come together, be united and change the situation." She maintained.

Although there were visible changes in the conditions of women, with hundreds of thousands of women and girls going to work, schools and universities across the country, their conditions have not definitely changed.

But security and human rights remain closely associated issues in the country. Most of the human rights abuses, such as the eviction of thousands of ethnic Pashtuns from northern Afghanistan, were committed by warlords assuming power after the Taliban defeat.

This motivates many Afghans to criticise the US-led coalition. "The very commanders and warlords who had horrible human rights records from their rule in the early 1990's, and who had been eliminated by the Taliban, were brought back to power last year by the United States and its coalition forces as the current politico-military arrangement was designed," Malikyar maintained.

She added that such warlords in provinces received massive military and financial assistance as the world claimed that it helped President Karzai in re-establishing the rule of law.

FUTURE

So what lies ahead for Afghanistan in 2003? "It depends on a lot of very unpredictable events. I never would have predicted what happened now," Rubin said, adding that the future of the country is not going to be independent of the future of the region and the future of the rest of the world. "It will depend on what happens in the Persian Gulf with Iraq. It will depend on what happens between India and Pakistan and how stable is Central Asia," he explained.

But Presidential Spokesman, Sayed Fazle Akbar remained optimistic. "After a lot of bitter experiences the Afghans have concluded that their country should remain a moderate state. This will benefit us all," he said, adding that the international community was helping them in establishing a lasting democracy in Afghanistan. "The future of Afghanistan will be democratic and will set up an example for other countries in the region," he maintained.

Fisher echoed this view: "There is no room for pessimism in this line of work, so one has to be what I call a realistic optimist. See the bottle as half-full, not half-empty. So let's recognise the progress of the last year and build on it."

He hoped that as Afghans were highly entrepreneurial, much depended on regeneration and investment in the private sector. "But all this is taking place amidst considerable uncertainty. Insecurity continues, as does dissatisfaction with the pace of reconstruction," he concluded.

But actions speak louder than words. Malikyar left a comfortable life in New York to permanently return to Afghanistan after 23 years to help her nation. "After a quarter of a century a window of opportunity has opened to the Afghan nation," she maintained. "While easily avoidable mistakes

have been made in the past year, it is not too late to correct the past mistakes and make best use of this opportunity," she added.