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Rebuilding a Ravaged Land

By M. Ishaq Nadiri

Afghanistan has great potential for economic development. For decades investment, principally foreign but also domestic, has gone into either the opium business or politics — that is, into guns. The amounts have been large; the return has been mainly devastation. But Afghanistan can be rebuilt.

The first task is to feed the Afghan people, a critical political as well as humanitarian challenge: the people who control the guns must not become the people who control the food. The other great short-term challenge is resettlement of Afghans from Pakistan and Iran, as well as of those displaced within Afghanistan. Absolutely critical to resettlement is a sound plan for agriculture. Mine clearance and the building or rebuilding of dams, water pipelines, canals and water-purification systems require significant amounts of aid. But the tasks are clear and manageable and lead directly to self-sufficiency.

Within memory, Afghanistan had many orchards producing fruit for domestic use and serving a vigorous demand in neighboring countries and the Persian Gulf states. Afghans have also grown wheat, corn and barley, for both human and animal consumption. All of these activities can be greatly aided by building small dams to provide water for irrigation. Such dams on Afghanistan's many rivers would go a long way toward providing alternatives to raising opium poppies.

Resettlement of the countryside will require new housing, which dovetails with needed reforestation. Years of war left rural Afghans with no other fuel for heat and cooking than the trees around them. Regions once forested have become barren. Wood has

always been important both for fuel and building materials, and Afghans have been expert at managing woodlands. Reforestation will renew the countryside and work to prevent erosion when the current drought ends and rains fall on slopes that have lost the protection of their forests.

There is an enormous need — practical and symbolic — to rebuild the larger cities and the roads and airports that connect them and enable trade. Afghanistan's cities have al-

Afghanistan can again have forests and orchards.

ways depended on being crossroads for overland trade, for example between Iran and Pakistan. The country is also positioned to serve as a transit point for moving oil and natural gas from Central Asia to South Asia and the Arabian Sea.

Afghanistan can be more than a crossroads. It once exported natural gas to the Soviet Union. It has large reserves of copper and high-grade iron ore. One longstanding regional dream has been to combine Afghanistan's ore with Pakistan's coal to create a steel industry. It may simply be a dream. Yet European unification got its institutional start with continental cooperation on the exploitation of iron and coal to make steel. Perhaps this is the right time to do a little dreaming for Afghanistan and the region.

Some of the necessary help will come from among Afghan expatriates who have acquired experience and professional skills in their years of exile. Within Afghanistan, human capital has gone nearly untapped for years. Women have been steadily degraded, most recently to the point of

effective imprisonment. Children have been educated, at best, in the rudiments of Koranic scholarship; young men have been educated only in war. These people are the greatest of the country's resources. An investment in their education and health will be repaid many times.

The economy should be organized in a decentralized manner, with the emphasis on private-sector initiative. A decentralized system will respond better to local needs, while an emphasis on private effort is consistent with Afghan history and temperament. Developing autonomous economic regions, however, as has been proposed, would threaten the unity of Afghanistan. A mixed local-central system would weaken warlordism and prevent that concentration of resources in the cities that impoverishes the countryside and small towns, and ultimately the cities as well.

International commitment to reconstructing Afghanistan seems to be solid. There remains a need for careful coordination as well as political agreement among Afghanistan's neighbors. An international conference on Afghanistan should be held under the auspices of the United Nations to guarantee Afghanistan's self-determination, to ensure donor countries' commitments and to show that this new war will bring a new peace. □

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