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 those displaced within Afghanistan. Absolutely critical to resettlement is a plan for agriculture. Mine clearance and the building or rebuilding of roads, 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 alternative to raising opium poppies.

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Afghanistan can be more than a war zone, 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.

International commitment to re-constructing 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.