

Rebuilding Afghanistan: challenges and opportunities

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During her recent visit to Kabul, Condoleezza Rice admitted that America had made a mistake by losing its focus on Afghanistan following the Soviet withdrawal. She now not only looks forward to a long-term commitment to the country, but has also hinted at a mid-course correction. Rice has realized that there is more work to be done than just eliminating the remnants of the Taliban and al-Qaeda and capturing Osama. The United States now has to direct its energies towards state-formation and the rebuilding of Afghanistan.

Having been duly elected through a democratic process and obtained an absolute majority Karzai now has the confidence to turn his attention towards improving the quality of his citizens' lives. Rice's pat on the back gives him that extra self-assurance he needs to remove all obstacles in the way of reconstructing his war-ravaged nation. It is a major challenge for he has to cross a number of hurdles, but it has also given him an opportunity to make a place for himself in Afghanistan's history.

Karzai's immediate task was to correct the ethnic imbalance in his cabinet, which he has been able to partly achieve, without a backlash from those who dominated the scene soon after the removal of the Taliban regime. He is now trying to win over some moderate Taliban to make his cabinet more broad-based. He has also appointed two women ministers. For the first time in Afghanistan's history a woman has taken over the responsibility of running a province.

The second challenge he faces is to disarm the militias. The Disarmament,

Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) process, however, is not a simple affair as merely taking away weapons is not enough to ensure peace. Adequate funds have to be raised; alternative employment has to be provided; instructors have to be arranged; training has to be given and above all a peaceful environment has to be ensured. These are major challenges for the President. There is a danger of civil war breaking out when the coalition forces leave Afghanistan unless an Afghan police force backed by a new Afghan national army, fully trained and equipped with modern weapons is established.

Afghanistan has not had a modern police force for the last three decades. But by February 2005 an estimated 30,000 police had completed a short training course. An effective police force, however, also needs the presence of a legal system, which will enable them to arrest, investigate and prosecute criminals according to an accepted code of law. The Shariah and Loya Jirga have to be dovetailed into universally recognized judicial procedures. The new Afghan police will need better intelligence gathering units, more sophisticated communication equipment, improved measures for detecting crime and better mobility to trace out and arrest criminals.

A 70,000-strong new Afghan army is to be trained by the end of 2007. As many as 25,000 army personnel had been recruited and 17,000 adequately trained by the end of 2004. The process is incredibly slow, as a certain amount of verification has to be carried out to ensure that those who are recruited are not tainted with pro-Taliban sentiments.

The post-election scene in Afghanistan remains disturbing when it comes to the production of opium poppy. In 2003 opium poppy was cultivated on around 80,000 hectares. In 2004 the figure has risen to 131,000 hectares, which comes to an increase of around 200 percent in one year. Eighty four percent of the world's production of heroin comes from Afghanistan. Since many warlords and government officials are either directly involved in opium poppy cultivation or are encouraging drug trafficking, the problem of eradicating poppy and preventing drug trafficking has become even more difficult.

The Afghan government did not have a proper organisation to deal with narcotics, but in the post-election period a narcotics ministry has been formed to handle this issue. Hopefully the new cabinet will take steps in the foreseeable future to reduce and eventually eliminate poppy cultivation in Afghanistan.

A correct decision was made to hold only Presidential elections in October last year and parliamentary and district elections in May or June 2005, which will probably be postponed to September this year as a great deal of work has yet to be accomplished. If parliamentary elections are delayed for a longer period of time Karzai's credibility will be badly damaged, as people will begin to doubt his intention to have a parliamentary form of government.

Provincial Reconstruction teams (PRTs), involving armed military and civilian development personnel, are to help in maintain law and order in the area of their responsibility, and also assist in reconstructing their areas and complete small-scale reconstruction projects. By the end of 2004, 27 PRTs

had been established, and are projected to cover all of Afghanistan's 34 provinces by the year 2006.

It is gratifying that governments, which were instrumental in destroying Afghanistan's infrastructure, are now taking steps to undo the damage their armies caused. According to one report a total of \$17.4 billion has been pledged. Out of which only \$3.4 billion have actually been received and only \$9 billion has so far been utilized for major projects.

The United States has provided \$4.2 billion from October 2001 to June 2004 and the Congress has been asked to approve another \$1.2 billion for 2005. American engineers have rebuilt 400 kilometres of the Kabul-Kandahar highway and paved 1,600 kilometres of provincial roads. They have also repaired the Salang Tunnel.

Russia has written off the debt Afghanistan owes to it. In addition it has given a donation of \$117 million for raising the Afghan National Army. India has established six more medical centres, six more schools, a polytechnic institution, and has provided twenty-five tonnes of winter clothing. It has provided 50 buses and three air-buses and is training pilots for Ariana Airlines. The Karzai administration has given major projects to thirty Indian companies. India is laying power lines and carrying out a feasibility study of renewable sources of energy for the Afghan government. Indian products, including computer software and films, are flooding the Afghan market. In the military field India has given 300 military vehicles.

Iran has given \$ 560 million for the rebuilding and reconstruction of Afghanistan — the largest donation

from a developing country. Pakistan has also joined the international community in the rebuilding and reconstruction of Afghanistan and has committed to providing \$100 million, out of which \$30 million have already been disbursed. Pakistan has to speed up its efforts to help in this area. It was asked to rebuild the Torkham-Jalalabad Road, but the job has not been completed yet. Islamabad is still in the process of carrying out a survey of a rail link between Chaman and Kandahar. Islamabad sent 50 buses to Afghanistan but they were all right-hand drive vehicles, and Afghan drivers were reluctant to drive them as one drives on the right in Afghanistan, and not on the left.

The transit trade for Afghanistan does pose a problem, as Afghanistan does not want Pakistan to place any restrictions on the type of goods destined for Afghanistan and passing through Pakistan, although many items meant for Afghanistan find their way into our Bara markets. The official trade between Afghanistan and Pakistan is, however, expected to rise to \$1 billion as Afghanistan needs a lot of material for its reconstruction, which can be provided by Pakistan.

Reconstructing Afghanistan will require political stability, peaceful conditions, allocation of enormous resources, administrative ability, good governance, cooperation of the warlords and strict control over corruption. The challenge for Karzai is to disarm the militia, reduce the power of the warlords, increase the pace of reconstruction before donor fatigue sets in and the United States and the international community divert their attention towards more pressing requirements in rebuilding Iraq.