

Afghanistan

Afghanistan's communications

By David A Gross
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Cell phones, Web access and fiber optic networks are expanding across the country

AFGHANISTAN has been back in the news of late. Recent losses of civilian and military lives and insurgents increasing use of tactics such as kidnappings and bombings have had a negative impact on public perceptions of the country's progress.

But these developments should not overshadow the good news: The government is present in more areas than ever before, health care and education are being delivered to more people, the United Nations last month reported a sharp decline in opium production, and Afghanistan won its first Olympic medal at the Beijing Games.

To understand the importance of such achievements, consider how far Afghanistan has come in a short time. Less than seven years ago, the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, depriving Afghans of

their most basic rights. A key component of the Taliban's suppression was preventing people from communicating with one another; the country had virtually no telephones and no access to the Internet. To call relatives and friends who lived abroad, Afghans literally had to leave their own country.

Today, Afghanistan bears little resemblance to the nation it was long forced to be. Working together after the Taliban was removed from power, the US and Afghan governments recognized the importance of dramatically increasing access to communications networks and establishing access to the Web.

Experts from around the world helped Afghanistan establish a modern ministry of communications, capable of quickly licensing private mobile phone providers, effectively regulating a competitive communications environment and encouraging direct foreign investment into the extremely challenging post-conflict economy.

The United States sent technical advisers to Kabul to assist the new min-

istry in prioritizing telecommunications needs. These advisers helped the ministry replace state ownership of the old monopoly phone company through policies promoting private-sector competition.

They worked with ministry staff on

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spectrum management and implementing pricing policies to reduce the costs of equipment and Internet access. Importantly, they worked to finalize

Afghanistan's draft telecommunications law and the process for public review.

US industry also contributed, providing world-class training through the Washington-based United States Telecommunications Training Institute and the establishment of educational facilities such as the many Cisco academies located across Afghanistan - some of which are designed specifically to train female engineers.

The results of these joint efforts are remarkable: In 2001, Afghanistan had one of the lowest telephone penetration rates in the world. There were no mobile phones and fewer than 40,000 fixed-line telephones in a country of about 26 million. Today, Afghanistan has almost 6 million telephone subscribers, more than 5.4 million of whom use mobile phones, as well as five national and three highly competitive regional carriers.

The amount of private, foreign direct investment in the country associated with telecommunications has exceeded \$1 billion. The government's 2009 revenue from the communications sector alone is

expected to top \$100 million.

By encouraging private-sector investment and promoting a competitive environment, the benefits of modern communications are being realized across all economic and social classes.

Access to the Web has also become commonplace throughout much of the country. Afghanistan has more than 500,000 Internet users and at least 18 Internet service providers

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Officials said. (The drive will continue as requirement only," said from their homes in Bihar, destroyed 100,000 ha (250,000 acres) of farmland and killed at working for the displaced villagers. **Food scarcity:** Families who fled to makeshift camps 200,000 people from their homes and affecting nearly four million. REUTERS

Communications revolution

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Prices continue to drop. More than 70 percent of Afghanistan's people — including Afghans in some of the world's most remote places — now have mobile phone coverage.

Similarly, access to the Web has become commonplace throughout much of the country. Afghanistan has more than 500,000 Internet users and at least 18 Internet service providers. With US government support, an Afghan government project to construct a national fiber-optic network ring as new national highways are built has led to more than 1,000 kilometres of network facilities.

This will help broaden telephone and high-speed Internet access, at low cost, and better connect Afghanistan to other countries in Central and South Asia. Consider, too, the economic impact of these developments: The telecommunications and Internet sectors have created more than 60,000 jobs. They are also contributing to the ability of day labourers, farmers and small-business people to build their businesses.

Improved access to communications

and the decreased cost of using these transformative technologies have allowed the Afghan people to explore new ideas and information that counter the monopoly of misinformation and lies used for centuries to oppress women and others. These tools help deliver essential government services, including education and health care, more efficiently and less expensively throughout the country.

Many tough decisions lie ahead as durable institutions are built to enable the continued deployment of technologies that create new jobs and spur economic, social and political growth. The initiative and ingenuity of the Afghan people and the leadership of their government will be essential in building the foundation for continued success.

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