



Afghanistan: A Future The World Should Invest In

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Op-Ed

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As the leaders of international community gather in Berlin for a donors' conference on Afghanistan, their deliberations should be premised on a key reality: Positive momentum has developed on all fronts in Afghanistan. Although it will take a few years to fully restore normal life, the prescription for the way ahead should be simple: Invest further in the success already achieved by the Afghans and international community.

The Constitution approved by the loya jirga has advanced Afghanistan's democratic transition, with elections set to take place in September. And the people are eagerly awaiting their chance to express their opinions at the ballot box. At the same time, bottom-up democratization is taking place through the organization of thousands of village-level councils.

The Afghan people are becoming stronger partners in the war against Al Qaeda, Taliban extremists and other terrorists. Since the coalition shifted to a counterinsurgency strategy last fall, its forces have permanently deployed to contested areas and have formed ties with local leaders and communities.

The building of the new Afghan National Army is ahead of schedule. At least 16,000 troops will be trained by the end of 2004. Also, the program to train the Afghan National Police will produce 30,000 officers and patrolmen by that time. The Ministry of Defense has committed itself to transfer all heavy weapons to the army and to demobilize 40 percent of the militias by June. It has also promised to remove all militia units from Kabul, thus fulfilling the terms of the Bonn Agreement.

Though social and economic indicators for Afghanistan remain desperately low - literacy stands at an estimated 20 percent and access to basic health care at 15 percent - hundreds of schools and clinics will be opened around the country this year.

The completion of the initial paving of the Kabul-Kandahar highway last December foreshadows work that is beginning on the Kandahar-Herat segment of the ring road and other primary roads. In 2004 and 2005, more than 815 miles of secondary roads will be paved, linking thousands of communities to the primary road system and the markets.

The legitimate Afghan economy is growing at about 20 percent annually. In every village, town and city, Afghans are rebuilding their country themselves. All polls show that Afghans are strongly optimistic about their future, despite the challenges they face. Though the United States contributes to all these efforts, we are not alone. Several coalition nations are also making hard cash contributions. Equally importantly, the Afghan government and people are carrying what burden they can, even as they seek to build their capacities. Afghanistan wants to stand on its own feet. And they are headed in that direction.

Each of these positive outcomes is a result of multilateral cooperation, either through the coalition or through other organizations or bilateral arrangements. There is a building story of success in Afghanistan that redounds to the credit of every nation that is lending a hand.

The Afghans are not, and the international community should not be, deterred by the incident in Herat last week. It was a tragic bump in the road for Afghanistan. It highlights, however, the need to accelerate the Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR) of Afghan militia units.

The immediate objective for the international community should be to build on this positive momentum. Major challenges remain. It will take the sustained commitment of the international community 5 to 10 years to have major impacts on curbing opium production, ending war-lordism, rebuilding power networks and lifting social indicators to minimally acceptable levels.

When the world turned its back after the Afghans defeated the Soviet Union, the results were catastrophic - proxy warfare by regional powers, human deprivation and near famine, training camps for extremists and terrorists, and the attacks of Sept. 11. In this turbulent region, we can either help President Hamid Karzai and his government to build a moderate and democratic state and society, or risk that extremists will exploit Afghanistan's still fragile condition to make a comeback. The lesson is simple: Pay now to create peace and stability or pay later when instability leads to conflict, extremism or terrorism.

Afghanistan is succeeding. In Berlin, the international community can take a vital step toward greater success. However, this will take money and time. If we abide by the principle of reinforcing those things that are working - if we invest in success - the United States and the international community together can turn an important corner in winning the war against terrorism and affirm the humanitarian values in which we all believe.

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