

Afghan Dispatch

By Barnett R. Rubin

761 words

10 February 2004

The Wall Street Journal

A16

English

(Copyright (c) 2004, Dow Jones & Company, Inc.)

In his State of the Union address, President Bush proclaimed that Afghanistan "has a new constitution, guaranteeing free elections and full participation by women." At the meeting of G-7 finance ministers last weekend, Afghanistan's minister provided a sober analysis of what it will take to make the constitution's words a reality: \$28 billion over seven years, with about \$6 billion supplied directly to the government's budget.

Without the resources needed to revive Afghanistan's legal economy, no one will be able to establish a stable government or implement the constitution. But Kabul is running out of money, and the amount offered falls far short of the need. Afghans cannot build a constitutional order on a criminalized base. The IMF says at least 40% of the economy is illicit: the drug trade, trafficking in emeralds and timber, smuggling of artifacts, land grabs by warlords, and trafficking of women. Income from illicit exports finances most of the imports and provides much of the demand for the remaining parts of the economy -- trade and construction. This illicit economy is the tax base for insecurity. Those who profit from it command resources to resist the rule of law. And they're not alone: 25 years of war have ravaged the agriculture and herding from which Afghans formerly made a hard but self-sufficient life. Opium cultivation, or employment in opium harvesting or trafficking provide indispensable income.

Afghans demand that the government curb the gun-wielders. But the government cannot raise taxes to pay or equip its police. The head of the U.N. Office of Drugs and Crime saw the reality first-hand on his visit to an opium producing province in the northeast. Local traffickers zipped around in 4x4 vehicles, wielding satellite phones, with guards carrying automatic weapons. The police plodded on foot or bicycle.

The people demand security, but not at the cost of their livelihood. An Afghan security official told me that he could not attack drug traffickers, who included colleagues in government. He is under pressure to eradicate the crop, not interdict the trade. But without an economy to provide legal income, eradicating the only livelihood further undermines efforts to establish rule of law. Whichever way you look at the goals -- creating a tax base for the government, providing livelihoods to its constituents -- there is no way to turn Afghanistan into a stable state where terror finds no refuge without a legal economy that will outgrow the illegal one -- fast.

Two years ago, at the Tokyo donor conference, international organizations estimated it might take up to \$12.2 billion over five years, and up to \$18.1 billion over 10 to "rebuild" Afghanistan. The \$5 billion pledged then is nearly exhausted. The Afghan government is not only falling short of the Tokyo donors' assessments; it also believes they underestimated the cost. With the World Bank, the Afghan government has now "recosted" reconstruction, based on two years' experience with real Afghan conditions. The result is a study showing that laying the foundations of a state and economy that can outgrow the criminal sectors will require \$28 billion over the next seven years.

Kabul will present these results to a donor conference in March. But preparatory consultations have encountered resistance. While the U.S. has doubled its contribution to Afghanistan, adding another \$1.2 billion, it allocated \$22 billion last year alone to Iraq -- a country of about the same size whose standard of living is decades ahead of Afghanistan's. Europeans may squeeze a bit out of existing aid budgets, but they resist doing more, protesting what they see as U.S. plans to turn the multilateral effort in Afghanistan into a more unilateral one. Japan seems eager to do more, but has not yet said how much.

Meanwhile, the Taliban are regrouping; and opium production, which has soared since their overthrow, each year sets a new record. It doesn't matter if every country has met its Tokyo pledges. It matters only that we accomplish the goal we share with our partners in Afghanistan: turning that country toward stability, legality, and security. The Afghan government has in effect presented us with the bill for our own security. If we don't pay it, the newly passed constitution and the triumphal words of the State of the Union address will take their place in the long history of betrayed hopes.

Mr. Rubin, the author of "The Fragmentation of Afghanistan" (Yale, 2002), is director of studies at NYU's Center on International Cooperation.

Document J000000020040210e02a0001w

© 2004 Dow Jones Reuters Business Interactive LLC (trading as Factiva). All rights reserved.