

AFGHANISTAN

By a Special Contributor

In late 2001, in the aftermath of the war against the Taliban, the leaders of the various factions in Afghanistan met in Germany and agreed to establish an interim authority chaired by Hamid Kharzai. Following this, a nation-wide Loya Jirge (Grand Assembly) was held in Afghanistan in June 2002, and elected Hamid Kharzai, by secret ballot, as President of the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan, with a two-year mandate in which to hold nation-wide elections. The country, with a population of some 28 million, covers an area of nearly 650,000 km², much of it is mountainous and remote, and although President Karzai holds the political reins, administratively, his hold is very weak and tenuous. He needs to extend his influence to the outlying regions and undertake reconstruction work in these areas in order to remain in the saddle.

Co-operation with Pakistan is considered a key element of Afghanistan's larger security problem. Fears about the resurgence of the Taliban is a major worry, as is Al Qaeda activity and drug trafficking. Armed groups ('warlords') have influence in the regions. Most ordinary people that are part of these groups want to live a normal life, but opportunities are limited. There is a disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programme ('DDR') which, if implemented, can lead to improvement, but it is a slow and lengthy process. The return of the 'poppy culture' or opium production is also a very serious issue. New programmes for eradication of the poppy have been initiated, but as this is a global problem, Afghanistan will not be able to deal with the issue on its own.

There are also the problems arising from religious bigotry; the precepts of Islam and the demands of international human rights are conflicting. For instance, Afghanistan's chief justice, Fazl Hadi Shinwari, has proscribed co-education and cable television as contrary to Islam. Women are also banned from driving and singing on state television.

President Hamid Karzai's sole strength is US support. Barring a token allegiance to him, the major warlords function on their own. For example, in the resource-rich Herat Province, Governor Ismail Khan's diktats have been almost presidential, in the Balkh region the irascible Dostum is a law unto himself, flying his own flag and flaunting his own currency, and Burhanuddin Rabbani's writ runs in the high mountains of the Badakshan region.

The official currency, the afghani, has become worthless and people have to carry bundles of notes to buy petty items. As its contribution to Afghanistan's reconstruction, the US proposes to offer US\$929 million in fiscal 2005.

If lasting peace and stability can be achieved, the minerals sector could play an important part in Afghanistan's economic recovery. Natural resources include base metals, iron ore, industrial minerals, precious and semi-precious stones, coal, oil and natural gas.

At Ainak, south of Kabul, there is a copper mine and smelting facilities built with Soviet aid in the 1980s. The smelter at Ainak worked only partially but the mine had the capacity to produce 150,000 t/y of ore. However, mining operations were badly affected by US bombing during the war against the Taliban. The Russians estimated reserves in the Ainak region at some 360 Mt averaging 0.7%-1.5% Cu.

Afghanistan possesses large coal resources and proven reserves of high-grade coal are estimated at 100 Mt, with a further 400 Mt in the probable category. The deposits are mostly concentrated in the region between Herat and Badakshan in the north. Coal is mined at Karkar in the Pule-e-Khumri region, at Ishpushta near Doshi to the north of Kabul and at Dar-e-Suf to the south of Mazar. Coal output used to be around 180,000 t/y and efforts were being made to raise capacity to 300,000 t/y. Czechoslovakia used to supply the mining equipment needed to extract coal in the hard coal mines in the north.

A cement plant with a capacity of 115,000 t/y, set up with Czech assistance, worked (with interruptions).

Formerly, an important source of foreign exchange was natural gas, supplied by pipeline to Uzbekistan. Output used to be in the region of 2,400 m³/d, most of it obtained from Shiberghan and Sar-i-Pol in the north, where there is a large reservoir of gas and estimated reserves of some 2,000 billion m³. Prior to the war, some natural gas was utilised as feedstock for the fertiliser plant at Mazar-e-Sharif and high-grade urea was exported to Uzbekistan. Mazar-e-Sharif was a stronghold of the Taliban and heavy US bombing has crippled the facilities there. Natural gas was also used for running a 34 MW generator at Mazar-e-Sharif for producing electricity.

The Hajigak Hills, about 100 km west of Kabul in Bamyan Province, are a repository of high-grade iron ore, estimated at 1,700 Mt. Bamyan was the scene of incredible vandalism during the Taliban regime when centuries old, rare Buddha statues were razed to the ground.

Other significant mineral deposits include high-grade chrome ore in the Logar valley, near Herat, uranium (formerly mined in the Khwaja Rawash mountains to the east of Kabul and exported to the Central Asian countries), beryllium in the Kunar Valley, gold and silver in the Panjshir Valley, lapis lazuli in Badakshan, and asbestos, sulphur and mica in the vicinity of Maimana. In the 1980s, geological mapping by Soviet geologists identified potential resources of uranium, beryl, barite, lead, zinc, fluor spar, bauxite, lithium, tantalum and emerald.

Afghanistan has large deposits of lapis lazuli, emeralds, rubies, sapphires and tourmaline, mainly in the remote north-eastern region of the country, and during the Northern Alliance's five-year war against the Taliban regime, its efforts were largely financed by gemstone mining.