
Afghanistan

Ending the Colonial Legacy Means Developing Agriculture

by Ramtanu Maitra

June 25—If, and when, the U.S. and other foreign troops leave Afghanistan, the Afghan people will have to go back to their former, relatively primitive way of life. That is, because, despite all the rhetoric, and the billions in taxpayers' dollars that have been pumped into Afghanistan to “win the war,” the occupying forces, and the countries they represent, have done little, and will continue to do little in the coming days, to help Afghanistan emerge as an independent sovereign nation-state, after they pack up their rucksacks and leave.

For Afghanistan to prosper, a new agricultural development policy must be adopted. Afghanistan and other nations, such as those throughout Asia and Africa, have suffered hundreds of years of vicious colonial looting, manipulation, and control, led by the British, French, Belgian, Spanish, Portuguese, and other such foreign rulers. These imperial powers forcibly imposed the “free trade and free enterprise” ideology on their colonies; those former colonies can only become truly independent, when they achieve food security—not by depending upon food purchases from abroad or food aid from “generous donor nations” to feed their citizens.

Many developed nations, such as the United States, Germany, Japan, and South Korea, developed their infrastructure, manpower, and industry alongside the development of a largely self-sufficient agriculture. But, since the post-World War II era of Imperial Free Trade, nearly all the industrialized nations have been emulating British colonial methods, using the loot procured through exploitation of de facto colonies, to be able to pay “top dollar” to buy up food from the world food cartel-run private enterprises, irrespective of food shortages that continue in food-growing poorer nations.

There are others, such as the oil-rich Gulf countries, who are now using their oil-wealth to buy up food and food-producing regions in the underdeveloped nations to keep their own citizens fed. For the developing na-

tions, however, food security is key to their independence. Even larger nations, such as Egypt, are reeling under the pressures of social unrest, and making foreign policy adjustments, in order to remain “independent,” as they face persistent food shortages.

What a Successful Agricultural Sector Does

Over the years, the world has been told by the economists, imbued with British free-trade and free-enterprise thinking, and the mindset of accountants, that the former colonial countries should produce “value-added” products, and, if they cannot consume them, to sell them on the world market. While less blatant, the other colonial powers did the same. In Africa, for example, development of agriculture, and the infrastructure that is the foundation of this sector, was not on the agenda of the colonial nations. Africa was rich in natural resources and mineral reserves. These were exploited to enrich the colonial powers: Only as much physical infrastructure was developed in these countries as was necessary to facilitate the looting. The colonial powers were not there to build nations; they were there to enrich themselves, exploiting the “cheap” manpower of the conquered countries, using brutish force whenever necessary.

As for Afghanistan, which sits on an East-West crossroads, it is imperative that it have an agricultural sector that would ensure the sustenance of its growing population. Anything else will keep it as a cockpit, where wars will be fought and Afghans will die.

At the same time, Afghanistan cannot be a merely agrarian nation. It does not have enough water resources, nor has it any access to sea water which can be desalinated to augment its water requirement. As a result, Afghanistan must become self-sufficient in food, and then move on to developing its small and medium-scale industries to nurture its population.



USAID/Julie Fossler

If Afghanistan is to develop as an independent, sovereign nation, it must have food security, based on a modern agro-industrial economy. Here, locally produced seeds and grains are displayed at the October AgFair in Kabul, sponsored by the Ministry of Agriculture, the Afghanistan International Chamber of Commerce, and USAID.

The most fundamental benefit of a successful agricultural sector lies in what it builds into the nation. To begin with, an agricultural sector requires power, water, sufficient manpower, development of agro-industries, and a transportation network that spreads throughout the country. On the other hand, an industrial facility or the exploitation of mineral reserves, do not require these elements of physical infrastructure to be developed widely throughout the nation. An industrial plant needs a few skilled people, some captive power, and local supply of water to succeed. But that “success,” as it is widely considered by the present day free-traders, may bring good fortune to a handful of manufacturers, and the buyers and users of that commodity, but does little to ensure food security or sovereignty of the nation.

A successful agricultural sector is not the be-all or end-all of nation-building. However, it is the first step that needs maximum efforts and, if done correctly, lays the foundation for a successful nation. If the importance of the agricultural sector is understood, and the sector is fully developed, it acts as a shield against external manipulations. The process itself develops skilled man-

power. Research and extension services create agronomists who live in the country and work toward development of high-yield varieties of seeds and improvement of undernourished land. Development of water resources, which includes irrigation, and water supply to the agro-industries and population in general, produces engineers and technicians who build dams, canals, and flood plains. This act itself protects soil, the land, and the environment in general.

Power is also a necessary element in developing agriculture. Power sources could be hydroelectric and fossil-fuel-based power plants initially, but the objective would be to move towards developing nuclear fission-based power plants. This would require some time, but it would also require the development of a high-technology-based industrial sector.

The agricultural sector would need development of bulk-transportation, preferably a railroad network. However, in light of the rough Afghan terrain, the initial transportation network could be based on roads. In the southern part of Afghanistan, in the highly fertile lands of Dasht-e-Khas, Dasht-e-Margow, and the Rigestan plains butting against Iran, an extensive railroad network can be developed to facilitate the interaction between agricultural lands and urban centers. The agricultural sector would also require agro-machinery, such as tractors, harvesters, hoeing machines, etc. The manufacturing, and maintenance, of such machinery would introduce industries that would help train skilled workers and technicians. In addition, a well-fed population will be more productive and healthy, and, over the years, more diverse in its pursuit of future.

Most important of all, a successful agricultural sector will have the potential to unify the nation. Foreign occupiers, and adventurers, over the years, have taken advantage of disunity among the northern Afghans—mostly Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras—and the majority Pushtuns, who inhabit central, eastern, and southern Afghanistan. For instance, when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan in 2001, U.S. special forces came in, using the support of the Northern Alliance—an alliance of Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazara—against the Pushtun-dominated Taliban. In other words, food will not only secure the Afghan nation, but it has the power to unify the country against foreign invaders.

The U.S. Failure

When the United States invaded Afghanistan in the Winter of 2001, a knee-jerk reaction to punish al-Qaeda,



cated in the northern province of Balkh, into a sprawling commercial farm, with miles of strawberry fields and thousands of cashmere goats. Located in a relatively peaceful area, some 400 kilometers northwest of Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif is the nation's second-largest city, and is in better shape than much of the country, as it managed to avoid most of the last 30 years of war.

From the look of it, it was not a bad place to develop such a firm. As a result, when the private company abandoned the project, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) decided to go it alone. It allocated \$40 million in reconstruction money to the venture, and directed a contractor to hire workers and purchase equipment, Chadrashekaran

the ostensible masterminds behind the 9/11 attacks on the United States, its immediate objective was to remove the Taliban, the protectors of al-Qaeda inside Afghanistan, from power. Following its initial military success, the U.S. proclaimed that the purpose of its stay was to engage in nation-building, and to bring the country out of its medieval economic state.

That has not happened, and will not happen, now that the Taliban, and many other Afghans, have regrouped, to harass and drive out the foreign troops. At the time the United States came into Afghanistan, the maximum annual production of opium in that country was 4,400 tons (in 1999), but less than 2,000 tons in all the previous years. Despite promises and gestures to turn back the tide, opium production, since the foreign troops landed in Afghanistan, has risen steadily. In 2007, it reached 8,200 tons, and in 2008, after it became evident to the powers-that-be that the Taliban and al-Qaeda were benefitting immensely from the opium production, it came down half a notch to 7,700 tons. Meanwhile, Afghanistan became more volatile, and a large section of its population, including its farmers, was criminalized by the opium-heroin-hashish traffickers.

In a well-researched article that appeared in the *Washington Post* on June 19, Rajiv Chandrashekar pointed out a series of wrong policies that Washington had adopted pell-mell, under the pretext of developing the Afghan economy. He pointed to one such project, where a private entrepreneur laid out a plan to transform a vacant tract near the city of Mazar-e Sharif, lo-

reported. It was not until a year later, after several million dollars had been spent, that agency officials realized why the Afghans had not cultivated the land themselves: The water and soil were too salty to grow crops.

"It was a total waste of resources. It was a diversion of reconstruction money from other more effective and beneficial projects," *The Post* quoted Frauke de Weijer, a development specialist who worked with USAID contractors building the farm. It was evident that it was the idea of a cash crop, for sale to the outside world, that inspired the USAID official, and not a plan to develop Afghanistan's agriculture.

But officials at USAID, which has spent almost \$7.8 billion on Afghan reconstruction since 2001, maintain that their programs have been effective. They note that they have funded the construction of 1,600 miles of roads, the building or refurbishing of 680 schools, and the training of thousands of civil servants. In the agricultural sector, the agency has pointed to a number of achievements: the transport of Afghan pomegranates to markets in Dubai, the opening of rural farm-supply stores, and the restoration of pistachio orchards. "This program has had a remarkable success," said Bill Frej, the agency's director in Kabul, the *Washington Post* reported. But Richard C. Holbrooke, Obama's envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, thinks otherwise. The Obama Administration, he said, needs "to fix what we have inherited."

Mohammad Asif Rahimi, Afghanistan's newly appointed agriculture minister, agrees with Holbrooke. He says the reason for USAID's failure to improve the

situation was obvious: USAID had focused its money and attention on its own programs, instead of helping Afghans assume responsibility for their affairs. Agency officials said they did not provide more assistance to the ministry because they regarded Rahimi's predecessor as an ineffective leader. As Rahimi learned more about the U.S. agriculture strategy, he said he became increasingly angry. "This 'leave it to the hands of the private-sector' approach—it's absolutely unrealistic. The agriculture sector needs a lot of support from the government," he told the *Washington Post*.

The Task Ahead

On the other hand, there is a realization that what Afghanistan must immediately do, is to build its agricultural sector. Turkish Agriculture and Rural Affairs Minister Mehmet Mehdi Eker, after a meeting with Rahimi in Ankara, said, "we can implement a joint (agricultural) program with Afghanistan."

"We are well aware of the difficulties experienced by Afghanistan in the last three decades. We wish to assist in solving the problems of Afghanistan and in the development of this country. We think that we can have a joint agricultural program to facilitate agricultural growth and rural development in Afghanistan. We may be able to receive financial assistance from the United States and can implement an agricultural-rural development project to be led by the governments of Turkey, Afghanistan and U.S." Eker said.

What is not widely known to outsiders, is that, in the 1960s and early 1970s, Afghan farmers produced abundant cereals, fruits, vegetables, and meats for domestic consumption and export. But 30 years of war has taken its toll, not only on its people, but the physical infrastructure, the key to the agricultural sector, as well. This is particularly devastating to the country as a whole, since an estimated 75% of Afghanistan's 34 million people live in rural regions where agriculture is the principal means of livelihood. Soviet troops planted land mines all over the country, rendering large areas of land useless, and forcing large numbers of people to become refugees. The resulting cut in production caused massive food shortages. Kabul University produced a report in 1988, which found that agricultural output then, was 45% less than it was in 1978, the year before the Red Army marched into Afghanistan.

USAID estimates that over 6 million Afghans chronically lack enough food to eat. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) predicts Afghanistan will

have to import 2.3 million tons of cereals between July 2008 and June 2009, more than double the 1 million tons imported over the same period the previous year. The Asian Development Bank, in its 2008 report, said Afghanistan experienced a "serious food crisis" in 2008, due to inadequate rainfall, surging commodity prices, and "restrictions on wheat exports from Pakistan" (the main source of supply). FAO estimates that total wheat production dipped 40% from 2007 to 2008, when an estimated 2.6 million tons were harvested, and that agricultural production will see no major increase in 2009; Afghanistan will continue to rely on external assistance and food imports.

Afghanistan's arable agricultural resource base is about 7.5 million hectare (mha) of cultivable land, which is divided into rainfed and irrigated land. The rainfed area, largely located in the northern provinces and dominated by cereal production, is estimated at about 4 mha. However, like all rainfed areas around the world, cultivation of these 4 mha depends on rainfall. Since drought frequently visits Afghanistan, much of this land is not cultivated and remains fallow. One report says the recent succession of dry years has reduced the annually cultivated rainfed area to less than 0.5 mha. Such reduction of arable land in drought years, drastically reduces the overall grain production. At present, rainfed cereal production has fallen to about 10% of expected production in a normal rainfall year. As a consequence, food security, especially in the northern areas, remains the first priority.

The principal output of the irrigated systems is wheat, accounting for about 80% of production, and a range of horticultural crops. The average national yield of irrigated wheat in recent years has remained low, around 1.3 tons/ha. In a developed agricultural sector, the average yield of wheat per hectare is more than 4 tons, as it is in the Punjab province of India.

In Afghanistan, the prewar irrigation systems have been virtually destroyed, and need extensive repairs; only 25% are currently operating, the UN believes. Further impediments include inadequate access to credit; a tattered highway system (Afghan officials estimate that 58% of rural villages have only seasonal access to roads, while the average distance to the nearest road is nearly three miles); the perennial shortage of wheat seeds; and unreliable electricity. An estimated 30% rise in the cost of fertilizer, between March 2007 and April 2009, has crippled Afghanistan's agriculture and the Afghan farmers.