

LETTER FROM KABUL: Reconstructing Afghanistan

by Joe Lovoi

I am currently on vacation in Kabul, because, frankly, nowhere else stimulates the same calming state of mind in me as does Afghanistan. Landing for the first time at Kabul International Airport (previously I have always made the journey overland, as air access was restricted) was a refreshing shift of trajectory. I was able to briefly imagine how modern Afghanistan must have looked fifty years ago: the Switzerland of Asia in the throws of self-discovery, too taken with its own independence to notice how problematic a pervasive culture of individualism might become.

A year and a half after the liberation, a view from Kabul seems to show an Afghanistan that is beginning to get a grip on stability. Much of the city is now supplied with electricity and for longer hours, running water is more frequent, the bazaars are teeming with life, women are employed by private businesses as well as with the government, the *burqa* is becoming a rarer encounter, housing is more abundant, the international compounds feel more penetrable, and the resources more accessible, people are optimistic about the upcoming elections, and the general security situation has vastly improved. Less than a year ago rocket attacks were a weekly, if not daily, occurrence. Today I can walk through the bazaar alone. I was even told about a small but lucrative prostitution ring that has started to serve the more affluent neighborhoods of east Kabul.



Castle, looking west, Kabul (Afghanistan #23). © 2002 Brian McKee.

Despite the signs of life returning to the capital, security in the rural areas has deteriorated somewhat, especially in the vast and anarchic south. Aggravated by the ongoing drought, it appears that there has been a fundamentalist resurgence among the local tribal populations in the southeastern zones. Groups led by ex-Taliban commanders who fled to Pakistan during the American military campaign have regrouped and challenged—sometimes successfully—the government’s presence in the south. Nangrahar province in the east, however, is significantly more patrolled and secured now that the interim government is beginning to respond to the centrality of the Jalalabad economy, the agricultural hub of the country. The 150km road connecting Kabul to Jalalabad has been repaired, reducing the travel time from ten hours to just three hours.

Fortunately the government has succeeded in reconstructing a semi-workable police force and municipal bureaucracy in Kabul. Wireless technology is rapidly becoming more accessible to the general public, which should begin to both help the government achieve higher efficiency and stimulate domestic commerce. The World Bank has opened a compound downtown to help the Ministry of Finance manage its budgets and establish the framework for a modern banking system.

Briefly, it seems to me that the expectations of the international donor community, as well as the priorities of the agencies of development, have started to approach realism. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is finally mobilizing its large budget, which had been held up for almost a year and, amazingly, prioritizing it for rural rehabilitation. Illicit crop eradication has (for now) become a taboo subject, considering that the only effective controls seem to be draconian. However, this has caused a diversification of projects targeting agricultural reforms and rehabilitation as a

de facto means of addressing the drug issue without actually committing to a plan.

Amidst all of this, the U.S. finds itself in a very interesting position. Now should be an incredibly opportunistic time for America to step up its involvement in Afghanistan and reassert its commitment before the attention of the entire world, including the Muslim world. Servicemen in Afghanistan (who, as confirmed by rumor, have been completely charmed by the Afghani people and fascinated by the industriousness of such a poor country) are ripe to receive a huge boost in morale if they could only witness how comparatively little effort would be required to make an enormous difference in the lives of millions. Going in, claiming a humanitarian and political victory, and getting out at the right time could be just what the U.S. needs to score some positive points for its new hegemonic program which, until now, has not really produced any of the stellar results that were once promised.

While Iraq appears to be more and more of a financial and ideological nightmare, the relative calm in Afghanistan should strike members of the U.S. government as a cool and clear oasis in the heart of the Islamic world. Achieving positive normative results through a smart combination of aid packages and military support, combined with the overwhelming support of the international community to oversee the reconstruction, should really be a no-brainer. It would both secure American interests in central Asia for the long term and cut out the heart of the argument of the fundamentalist power base, which continually represents America as the head of a snake that is trying to devour the Muslim world whole.

Joseph Lovoi attended the BGIA program in the fall of 2002, where he interned with Doctors of the World. He has traveled extensively in Afghanistan, where he works promoting animal husbandry projects. He is a December 2003 graduate of Bard College .