Afghanistan
A Transformation in Progress

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On a warm day in the spring of 2016, a Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock convoy was traveling from Kandahar city when it was hit by a roadside bomb. Minister Assadullah Zamir had planned to fly to Helmand province that day. “When the roadside bomb blew up one of the vehicles in my motorcade, my colleagues told me to postpone the trip to Helmand province,” says Mr. Zamir. He insisted however and the group travelled to Helmand. “There, the welcoming attitude of the farmers and their passion for their work made my visit a memorable one. After we began talking with people about their problems, my colleagues and I completely forgot about the incident.”

The agriculture sector tops the National Unity Government’s list of priorities. Since the time the administration assumed power in 2014, President Ghani has announced agriculture development as the main road for the country to reach economic and political stability. He has made the development of agriculture one of his top priorities, recognizing its vital role to the future of Afghanistan.

**Importance of Agriculture for Afghanistan**

The agriculture sector is the economic pulse of Afghanistan. The agriculture sector has been one of the major income-generating sources.
for Afghans far into the past. According to World Bank statistics, more than 60 percent of the country’s population works in agriculture. Nearly 75 per-cent of Afghans generate their income through this sector, and agriculture formed more than 22 percent of GDP in 2015. Currently, fresh and dried fruits, saffron and animal skins make up the bulk of the coun-try’s agricultural exports, with $207 million in fresh and dried fruit exported in 2015. Along with industry and services, agriculture can serve as one of the key sectors in projecting Afghanistan to economic self-suff-
Afghanistan had reached agricultural self-
sufficiency between 1960 and 1970. However, three decades of war brought significant damage to the sector. Approximately 2 million of 3.1 million hect-
ares of arable land lost its agricultural capa-
bility due to destruction of irrigation sources. Gardens, canals and arable land were broadly destroyed in the war.

Investment in Agriculture
In 2002 only 1.2 million of Afghanistan’s eight million hectares of arable land was cultivated. Since this time, Afghanistan has reconstruct-
ed 5,000 irrigation canals, raising the coun-
try’s total arable land to 2.1 million hectares in 2016. A 5-year plan of the government will reconstruct 2,000 additional irrigation canals.

Likewise, the total area of the country’s for-
est has increased to 856,000 hectares in 2015, compared to 364,000 hectares in 2002. In early 2002, farmers were not able to easily and regularly irrigate their farmlands due to problems with irrigation systems. Horticult-
ture was less common and only existed in very traditional forms. Most farmers did not have sufficient information to maintain and protect their crops. However, due to efforts made in this sector, thousands of hectares of standard orchards have been developed across the coun-
try. The Ministry of Agriculture’s development workshops, farmer schools and cooperatives have led to heightened awareness among farm-
ers and a lower level of pests destroying crops. The majority of farmers use modified wheat grains, which are produced in Afghanistan’s own Enterprise Farms. This has led to a high-
er quality of their agricultural products and an increase in farmer income. “We only used to plant onions in our village,” says Nooruddin, 50, a farmer in Samangan province. “After the National Horticulture and Livestock Project (NHLP) reached our village, we began to culti-
vate radishes, garden cress, eggplant and cu-
cumber. As we learned proper ways of cultivating vegetables and taking care of our gardens, they have turned greener and more productive and our lives have improved.”

National Unity Government Works for Agriculture
Since the National Unity Government assumed the administration, the Ministry of Agriculture has finalized its Five Year Strategy, and it is currently implementing it. According to the new strategy, one million hectares of new land will receive access to irrigation in the next 10 years, and the average income of Afghanistan’s farmers will increase by 40 percent over the next five years. Afghanistan can nearly reach self-sufficiency in cereal crop production by 2020. Under the new strategy, the government has leveled 60,000 hectares of land, which has led to a 25 percent increase in agricultural production. As many as 1,200 natural cool storage facilities have been built in Bamyan province, which produces 90 percent of Afghanistan’s potatoes. These facilities have decreased the level of potato rot from 90 percent to 3 percent. The Ministry of Agriculture’s implementation of the Geographic Information System (GIS) has enabled it to identify current and upcoming agricultural and land-related problems, and devise highly effective systems to solve these problems.

The Five Year Strategy of the Ministry of Agriculture emphasizes the production of saffron as one of Afghanistan’s main agricultural products, and a viable alternative to poppy cultivation. The country produces 3 tons of saffron each year, with 80 percent of the work—from cultivating to packaging—carried out by women. The average price for each kilogram of saffron on international markets is $1,800.

Based on the National Saffron Plan, Afghanistan will increase saffron production by five tons over the next five years. The National Irrigation Plan has also been finalized under the National Unity Government. According to this plan, 900,000 hectares of land will be brought under irrigation, 120,000 of this for the first time. Forty percent of Afghan women work in the agriculture sector, and the Ministry of Agriculture has prepared the first National Strategy for Women’s Role in Agriculture, which aims to increase women’s income by expanding their knowledge of agriculture, providing necessary equipment and offering marketing trainings. The plan is already implemented across 17 provinces of Afghanistan and will be expanded to all 34 provinces next year.

In another development, the Salma Dam was inaugurated in Herat province in 2016, bringing irrigation to 75,000 hectares of land. The dam solves irrigation problems for many farmers and plays a major role in the economic development of the country.

The Ministry of Agriculture has also done a lot of work in technical areas. For instance, 28
provincial directors of agriculture have been replaced through open competition, replaced by professionally trained and Master’s degree-educated candidates. The Ministry of Agriculture has sent 300 students to India, Japan and the United States for Master’s and doctoral studies in agriculture.

**Challenges and Opportunities**

In spite of considerable development in Afghanistan’s agriculture sector over the past 15 years, more than half of the country’s arable lands still lack irrigation. Afghanistan has yet not been able to properly preserve and package its agricultural products, and the country spends $4.3 billion on agricultural imports annually. About 25 percent of Afghanistan’s wheat crops are wasted due to lack of proper post-harvest systems. Irrigation water loss reaches 35-40 percent. Shortage of proper cold storage has caused the country’s farmers to sell their products at lower prices and over only one season, incurring large economic losses as a result. Due to its high market price, many farmers still continue to cultivate poppies, and Afghanistan still tops the list of world opium producers. However, given Afghanistan’s potential for remarkable agricultural development, strict implementation of the Agricultural Development Strategy and the aid provided by the international community in this sector, the country can reach economic self-sufficiency and tackle the challenge of drug production.

“The reason why I tirelessly work day and night and in the face of major security challenges is that the agriculture sector can fundamentally change the lives of Afghans and lead the country towards economic and political stability,” Minister Zamir says.
Fifteen years ago, Afghanistan’s infrastructure lay in ashes. By the end of the Taliban regime in 2001, 90 percent of the country’s roads had been severely damaged, only six percent of Afghans had access to electricity and hospitals and schools operated from bombed-out, collapsing structures. Much of the country was in rubble. Over the past 15 years, the country has come a long way in reconstructing this damaged infrastructure.

**Progress in Transportation**

Afghanistan is a landlocked country, so roads serve as the country’s main trade, transit and transportation routes. Since the devastation of 2001, construction investments have transformed the country’s highway system from a mere 121 kilometers of usable pavement to tens of thousands of roads, including more than 8,000 kilometers of national and regional highways, and 26,000 kilometers of provincial and rural roads. Many domestic and international road construction projects are ongoing. The reconstruction of Afghanistan’s 2,700 kilometer Ring Road was completed recently, the Salang Tunnel is being upgraded and plans are underway for a 665-kilometer East-West Corridor and additional expressways. Four international airports serve as international transit hubs, operating in Kabul, Balkh, Herat and Kandahar provinces. The country’s railroad system, overseen by the Afghanistan Railway Authority, will further connect the country, both internally and with its neighbors. At a cost of $9 million, a feasibility study was completed for the development of a railway project to connect five regional nations. This railway will run 2,100 kilometers, including a 1,148 kilometer stretch in Afghanistan. It will start from China, pass through Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to northern Afghanistan, and then connect with Iran’s cross-country railway network to Turkey, Europe and ports in the Persian Gulf. For the first time, this project will connect Afghanistan by railway to countries in the Middle East and Eurasia. Construction has com-
menced on sections of the railway, including the 142-kilometer Herat-Khawaf Railway and the 590-kilometer Turkmenistan-Aqina Railway, where the Aqina land port lies on the border with Turkmenistan, in northern Afghanistan. Upon completion, these railways will boost the Afghan economy and provide a major trade artery to connect Afghanistan with its neighbors.

**Humanity-Centered Development**

Today, 2,200 health centers across the country keep Afghans healthy, and 67 percent of the population has access to quality healthcare—a quadrupling of health centers and nearly sevenfold increase in healthcare access from 2001. This availability and access to healthcare has brought a remarkable reduction in the country’s maternal and child mortality rates, which have plummeted by more than 75 percent and 15 percent respectively since 2002. Also contributing to this rise is a dramatic increase in access to clean drinking water, with more than 70 percent of Afghans reporting satisfaction with their access to drinking water in the Asia Foundation’s 2015 Survey of the Afghan People. The number of schools has also quadrupled to more than 15,000 today, with 9.5 million young Afghans attending school, including 3.5 million girls.

After the fall of the Taliban, Afghans lived largely in isolation from the world. Only one in every 450 had access to communications services, and it was often necessary to travel long distances—even sometimes to a neighboring country—to place a phone call. Today, Afghanistan’s $2 billion telecom sector provides connection to the world to the more than 70 percent of Afghans that own mobile phones.

In the agriculture sector, new horticulture systems have been implemented, and 5,000 irrigation canals have been reconstructed, expanding arable land by nearly a million hect-
ares and providing farmers with the infrastructure they need to feed the nation.

Energy Matters

The National Unity Government has paid special attention to the water and energy resources of the country. Under the National Unity Government, reconstruction has begun on eight hydroelectric dams, all financed by the Ministry of Energy and Water. Preparations are underway for an additional 21 dams. In 2016, the Salma Dam was inaugurated. The dam will provide irrigation for 75,000 hectares of land, and has an annual production capacity of 42 megawatts of electricity, meeting all energy generation needs of Herat province. When complete, the Bakhshabad Dam, in Farah province, will have the capacity to produce 27 megawatts of energy. The National Unity Government has also signed a memorandum of understanding with a Turkish company that will activate four turbines on the Kajaki Dam to produce 100 megawatts of electricity. For a project to regulate the Helmand River and meet the water demands of Nimruz province, the National Unity Government is working to complete the third and final phase of the Kamal Khan Dam construction project.

After 10 years of delay, the CASA 1000 energy project was inaugurated in 2016. When complete, the project will transmit 1,300 megawatts of electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan, for which Afghanistan will earn $56 million in annual transit fees. The Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India (TAPI) gas pipeline will transport Turkman gas through Afghanistan to South Asian markets along a 1,814 kilometer pipeline, creating 15,000 jobs in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan and generating $400 million in annual revenue for the Afghan government. Under recent infrastructure projects, northern Afghanistan has become connected with gas and the south with hydropower. Four thousand kilometers
of optical fiber provide the infrastructure for internet services and data transfer. The government has also begun a restoration project on Darulaman Palace, which will help to preserve cultural heritage while creating local employment.

**Industrial Infrastructure**

Only a handful of private companies existed in 2002, when GDP stood at a paltry $2.2 billion. Since then, hundreds of private and state-run production companies have emerged across the country, and GDP has increased tenfold to $22.2 billion. Afghanistan has six active industrial parks, with 11 additional parks under construction. Eight land ports operate across the country, and financial transactions are conducted through 17 private, state-run and international banks. The private sector has invested more than $10 billion in construction, mining, services, agriculture and industry.

To fuel this large-scale development, the National Unity Government reconstructed the Jabal Saraj Cement Factory, which had sat idle for 20 years. The factory has created more than 5,000 direct and indirect jobs, and produces 100 tons of cement daily. A second factory, the Cement-e-Ghori Factory, also contributes 400 tons of cement daily, reducing Afghanistan’s dependence on imported construction materials.

**The Rocky Road Ahead**

The reconstruction of a country does not come without challenges. For 15 years, Afghans have worked tirelessly to rebuild destroyed infrastructure, a shattered national economy and failed institutions. The National Unity Government has made remarkable progress, but faces often-insurmountable constraints, and is highly dependent on foreign aid. Insecurity poses a serious challenge to the execution of development projects, many provinces have minimal access to electricity, national imports far outweigh exports, many students still attend classes in tents and thousands of Afghans lack access to quality healthcare. The road ahead is long, but the revival of the country’s splintered infrastructure has accelerated development and regional cooperation, and paved the way for self-sustainability.
Once a center of trade and the meeting point of civilizations, Afghanistan’s geographic position has been both a blessing and a curse: the country’s strategic position has brought wealth and influence for the past 3,000 years, yet has also turned Afghanistan into a competitive playground for world powers, attracting invaders from Alexander the Great from the West to Genghiz Khan from the East.

Afghan politicians have historically complained about the bad fortune Afghanistan’s location has brought. However, under the leadership of President Ghani, the National Unity Government has committed to change the equation—turning Afghanistan into the ground where interests converge, rather than diverge. This will allow Afghanistan to take ownership of its economic future, and benefit the region by marrying energy-rich Central Asia to human resource-rich but energy-deficient South Asia.

As a landlocked country that has historically been reliant on international aid, regional connectivity is vitally important for Afghanistan in achieving self-reliance. One of the National Unity Government’s central
foreign policy objectives has been to reduce regional strains through promotion of regional economic interdependencies for shared sustainable development. President Ghani has made regional connectivity a priority, famously stating, “Breakfast in Delhi, lunch in Peshawar, and dinner in Kabul—that’s the world we seek!” The government’s Strategy for Self-Reliance addresses economic vulnerabilities while facilitating engagement with both the region and greater international community. Initiatives such as the Heart of Asia Process, the New Silk Road Initiative and the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan have set the stage for further steps to reduce Afghanistan’s dependence on international aid by focusing on regional economic cooperation, support for private sector-led development and growth, increasing domestic revenue and building domestic institutional capacity.

Transport has been a major area of regional cooperation. Building upon recent developments in the region, especially the nuclear deal between Iran and the West, President Ashraf Ghani signed the Chabahar Transit and Transport Agreement, which establishes a strategic transit route with Iran and India. The agreement also provides access to highways to connect Afghanistan directly with the Persian Gulf, which will reduce both the cost and shipping time of cargo by an estimated 50 percent. Along with the key partners of the United Arab Emirates, India and the United States, the Afghan government will construct three inland ports in the Afghan cities of Kabul, Jalalabad, and Mazar-e-Sharif, facilitating a dramatic increase in trade. Chief Executive Officer Dr. Abdullah visited China and signed the “One Belt, One Road” memorandum of understanding with the Chinese government, which aims to revitalize the ancient Silk Road through Afghanistan and enhance regional connectivity and private sector cooperation. At a total cost of $2 billion, the Five
Nations Railway Corridor will connect China with Central and South Asian countries, enhancing economic integration by connecting China to Iran via Afghanistan and Tajikistan. While feasibility studies for various sections of the railroad are ongoing, economic internal rates of domestic income on similar railways in the region range from 14 percent to more than 25 percent. Afghanistan’s section of the railway will run 1,148 kilometres, and will be completed within three years.

The energy sector is a second vital area of regional connectivity for Afghanistan. An electricity transfer project from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan (TUTAP) aims to supply the energy-starved South Asian countries with cost-effective Central Asian electricity, and thousands of Afghan houses lying on the route will benefit from increased and more affordable energy. The $1.1 billion CASA 1000 project, which was inaugurated in May 2016, transmits 1,300 megawatts (20 percent of Pakistan’s power deficit) of Tajik hydro-generated electricity to Pakistan via Afghanistan, reducing Afghanistan’s dependency on costly and polluting oil-based power generation. Seventy-five percent of the transmission lines will travel through Afghanistan, earning the country up to $56 million per year in transit revenue. CASA 1000 marks the first project to leverage Central Asia’s rich energy resources to supply energy-deficient South Asia with power on a mutually beneficial basis. Finally, the Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India (TAPI) gas pipeline will transport Turkmen gas through Afghanistan to the South Asian markets. The 1,814 kilometre pipeline will transfer 33 billion cubic metres of gas, from which Afghanistan will receive 14 billion cubic meters. TAPI will create 15,000 jobs in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan, and the Afghan government will earn $400 million annually from the project.
Trade is a final area the National Unity Government has prioritized to promote regional connectivity. The government is developing an Afghanistan Market Access Strategy, which aims to build demand for Afghanistan’s products and markets internationally and facilitate the bilateral opening of markets between Afghanistan and Asian countries including China, Iran, India, Russia and others.

The National Unity Government’s focus lies in building a sound basis for regional connectivity in order to end aid dependency, combat the threat of terrorism and transform Afghanistan into a peaceful and economically independent nation. The government’s current regional initiatives are based on a vision of a stable Afghanistan and the international community’s continued support for the country’s continued transition. An Afghanistan which secures its own political and economic future is the first line of defense against extremism, and will increase the prospects for stability both regionally and across the world.
In 2014, Afghanistan overcame one of the most challenging times in its recent history. The country faced major tests in security, political and economic transition. Although many observers believed the country was not strong enough to sustain these concurrent pressures, Afghanistan did successfully pass the tests, opening a new chapter in its political, security and economic life.

The most significant of these challenges was the security transition, as foreign forces handed leadership and responsibility to Afghan forces. Many believed it would be impossible for Afghan forces to stand alone on the battlefield. They believed Afghan forces were not sufficiently strong or mature to do the job independently.

The Afghan defense and security forces have come a long way in the past 15 years. Today Afghanistan’s security institutions lead their own affairs, from planning and training to conducting military operations. Forces independently plan and carry out an average of 50 planned military operations every day. Army and Police Special Forces have evolved into exemplary forces in the region. The Ministries of Defense and Interior employ 352,000 defense staff members, including 195,000 members of the Afghanistan National Army (ANA) and 157,000 Afghanistan National Police (ANP). All army and police personnel are registered through a biometric system and receive their salaries through a bank payment system.

The National Unity Government

The National Unity Government (NUG) marks Afghanistan’s first peaceful democratic transition of power from one elected government to another, taking place in 2014. The same year, Afghan security forces assumed leadership of the country’s security responsibility from international forces. Soon after assuming the administration, the NUG signed the Security and Defense Cooperation Agreement between Afghanistan and the United States. According to this agreement, the United States will help Afghanistan to maintain peace, security and stability, support its state institutions and long-term economic and social development, and encourage regional cooperation until 2024.
Afghanistan’s Defense and Interior Ministries have developed their five-year strategies for improvement and professionalization of the country’s security forces. Counter-narcotics security forces have cleared 12,377 hectares of land of opium and interdicted about 22,000 tons of narcotics in 2015, cutting an illicit business that provides funding for terrorist groups.

During the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw, NATO countries committed to financing and equipping Afghanistan’s security forces for the next four years. Currently thousands of members of Afghan security forces receive professional training both within the country and abroad. Last year alone, 35,368 ANA soldiers and officers graduated from professional military schools, educational institutions, in-service courses, officer courses and medical schools across the country. 51,402 ANP officers and cadets also graduated from various training programs last year, including in-service courses. Radio Police began broadcasting on 96.5 FM and the Police Call Center began its 24-hour service, which enables the public to call a hotline number to report problems or suspicious activity.

The Marshal Fahim National Defense University has graduated more than 14,000 military personnel since 2002. Its branches include the National Military Academy of Afghanistan, Afghan National Army Officer Academy, Non-Commissioned Officer Academy, Sergeant Major Academy and National Military School. The university enrolls 5,144 students, including more than 100 female students, and employs nearly 3,000 staff, who receive mentorship from foreign militaries. By 2020, the number of enrolled students is projected to increase to 10,000, training the military’s Officers, Sergeant Majors, and other leaders.

All these measures have enabled Afghanistan’s security institutions to better perform their duties. Afghans have offered extensive moral support for the country’s security and defense forces. From the streets of major cities to remote country villages, citizens have declared their support by organizing appreciation ceremonies to give flowers to forces. In 2015, ANA recruited more than 44,000 new members and ANP recruited more than 22,000 new members. This proves that despite casualties, there are still thousands of people who want to join Afghanistan’s armed forces. Both the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior are housed in modern buildings, and Afghan military bases are unparalleled in the region as the international security forces have handed over the control.
of 833 military bases around the country to the Afghan security forces. Reforming the security and defense sectors was one of the high priorities of the NUG from the outset. The government overhauled senior military leadership and professionalized training for officers. The government also introduced civilian controls over critical support tasks such as procurement, financial management and audits so that troops receive proper equipment, food and management. The government has openly acknowledged the challenges that corruption poses to the effectiveness of security forces, so it has started a strong campaign to end it. In order to end the long-standing coordination deficit between various security and defense organizations and promote the effectiveness of forces, the government has established necessary decisions. This has brought more coordination among various security and defense institutions. They have also created a joint headquarters for detective and intelligence affairs, which has markedly enhanced detective capacity and efficiency. As a result of these reforms, the functions and efficiency of Afghan national defense and security forces has significantly improved.

Air Force and Role of Women in Security Institutions

Because foreign forces have led Afghanistan’s security effort over the past 15 years, building and developing the country’s Air Force has not been a priority. However, as international forces withdraw and Afghanistan has assumed leadership and responsibility over its own security, the NUG has laid
the foundation for developing the country’s Air Force. Hundreds of Air Force members currently receive training in engineering and piloting at the Air Force University, both in Kabul and at Shindand Airport in Herat province. Meanwhile, hundreds of Afghan students study engineering, piloting and other military skills in the United States, India, England, Germany, the Czech Republic and Australia. In 2015, Afghanistan’s Air Force got 17 airplanes and helicopters. With dozens of planes and helicopters including A-29, MD-530, MI-17, MI-35, C-208 and C-130, the country’s Air Force now carries out 75-90 operative and logistical flights every 24 hours, allowing Afghanistan’s ground forces to receive further air support. Ministry of Defense forces have carried out 42,514 independent and decisive combat operations in all seven zones across the country in 2015. Another important priority for the NUG’s security institutions is encouraging and providing opportunities for women to join the ranks of security forces. Currently, approximately 1,500 female members serve at the Ministry of Defense. According to a personnel quota, women should make up 10 percent of the Ministry of Defense’s personnel, or 19,500 members. In the Ministry of Interior, there are approximately 3,000 female members serving in capacities ranging from police general to pilot, cadet and common staff member. To build the capacity of its female personnel, the Ministry of Defense has launched a countrywide campaign and sent 110 young female members to study in Turkey. One of the young female pilots of the Ministry of Defense is Niloofar Rahmani, who won the U.S. State Department’s International Women of Courage Award in 2015. 500 female members of the Ministry of Interior have already finished their studies in Turkey and joined the ranks of ANP.

Challenges

In spite of great achievements in defense and security sectors, Afghanistan’s security and defense institutions face multiple and daunting challenges. 2015 marked the bloodiest year for Afghan security forces, and the level of violence and the number of both security forces and civilian casualties have increased in 2016. There are ongoing and intense wars in many districts around the country, showing that terrorists have remained a major challenge for Afghanistan and have turned the country to a battleground for achieving their goals. The presence of terrorists from neighboring countries, particularly central Asian countries, has increased from previous years. As a new security challenge, the Islamic State has posed serious threats to the security and stability of parts of the country. With these continued and emerging challenges, continued assistance of the international community to Afghanistan government and its security forces will play a vital role in maintaining the country’s stability and defeating terrorism.