

Rebuilding Afghanistan and Japan's Role

Sadako Ogata

Japan Society

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At the Ministerial Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan that took place in Tokyo on 21-22 January, sixty-one countries and twenty-one international organizations assembled. Well over 4.5 billion dollars altogether, and over 1.8 billion dollars for 2002 alone were pledged. It was the clearest demonstration of the commitment by the international community to support Afghanistan as it began its long journey to peace and stability. The representatives of the Afghan Interim Authority led by Chairman Karzai, attended the conference to express their determination to pursue the process of reconciliation and reconstruction.

Why did Japan take such an active role to host and advance the cause of Afghanistan? What does the task of reconstruction entail? These are the two issues that I wish to address in my opening remarks this evening.

To begin with, I should say that Japan always entertained special interest in central Asia, promoting the political stability and economic development of the region. The "Silk Road" brought forth nostalgic reminders of strong historical and cultural ties. During the last twenty years when Afghanistan suffered continuous conflict, Japan tried several times to intervene by bringing the warring parties together, especially in 1996 when the Taliban achieved substantial victory. Japan's efforts did not bear fruits, but its long held interests were internationally appreciated, especially in UN circles.

The September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center buildings and the Pentagon turned world attention on Afghanistan. In the last decades, Afghanistan had been a forgotten country, left to humanitarian charity and even inadequately at that. The United States led war against terrorism found ready response by a wide range of partners. Japan in close alliance with the United States, took several quick steps. The most noted was the adoption of the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law, which was passed by the Diet on 29 October. As the United States and other coalition partners began military action against the Taliban and al'Qa-ida, Japan carried out support activities by Self-Defense Force vessels providing supply of fuel to U.S. and U.K. ships in the Indian Ocean. It was, however, in the realm of peace and

reconstruction that Prime Minister pledged Japan's major contribution when he met with President Bush in Shanghai in October.

The United States and Japan co-hosted the Senior Officials Meeting on Afghan reconstruction in Washington on 22 November to kick off the process. The European Union and Saudi Arabia joined as co-chairs. At the time, the Bonn Agreement had not been reached, and the political road-map for the establishment of a legitimate government was still unclear. The subsequent conclusion of the Bonn Agreement no doubt owed much to the efforts of the United Nations, especially Ambassador Lakhdar Brahimi the Secretary-General's Special Representative and the Afghans themselves. It is indeed exceptional that a reconstruction conference would take place in advance of clear political settlement. A series of meetings took place following Washington and culminated in Tokyo. The overall thrust of these meetings was to send the political message that the international community would be forthcoming with significant assistance once the Afghans agreed on peace.

As the Afghan reconstruction agenda unfolded internationally, I was appointed by Prime Minister Koizumi to serve as his Special Representative to lead Japan's efforts. I had visited Afghanistan and the neighboring countries several times over the last years as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The Afghans were the largest since caseload of refugees, totaling close to 6.3 million when I took up the office in 1991. With the withdrawal of the Soviet occupying forces, many returned home. In the subsequent years, some went home as others continued to flee. At the end of 2000 when I left, they were still the major refugee group numbering some 2.5 million.

In the fall of 2000, when I visited Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran to make my last attempt at mobilizing support to solve the problem of Afghan refugees, the refugee hosting Pakistan and Iran, faced serious difficulties due to dwindling international aid. To the donor community, repatriation to Afghanistan was not an attractive solution, because Afghanistan at the time was under the fundamentalist Taliban regime. They assumed that nobody should want to go back and live under the Taliban. In spite of all the tragedies involving September 11th, for Afghanistan and the Afghan people, it was the subsequent developments following the attacks that brought them new opportunities. Personally, I felt privileged to be able to contribute to the betterment of the Afghan refugees who represented my biggest unfinished work.

In preparation for the Tokyo meeting, I visited Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran again in early January. The broad outline of Afghan reconstruction was to concentrate on two fronts: the state and the people.

First, at the level of the state, the most urgent task is to establish nationwide security. At the same time, administrative capacity has to be installed to provide services and governance. While the United States carries on the war against the remnants of the Taliban and al 'Qa-ida, the International Security Assistance Force authorized by the Security Council is covering the security of Kabul. However, there are worrying signs of security deterioration in some parts of Afghanistan. Chairman Karzai of the Interim Authority and many others have requested the Security Council to authorize an extension and expansion of the mandate of the International Security Assistance Force. I have joined my voice in asking the Council for early examination and determined action. Concurrent to the deployment of international forces, two related endeavors will have to be made: the establishment of the Afghan national defense and police force, as well as demobilization and reintegration of former combatants to civilian life. All three interrelated endeavors are major undertakings in a country full of arms and armed people. But they do have to produce rapid results, as the establishment of security is the basic condition for humanitarian and reconstruction work to proceed.

The need for the Interim Authority to develop service capacity is also urgent. When I called on Chairman Karzai in Kabul in early January and asked him what were the priority needs, he gave me an interesting and frank answer. He said that when he was out of the government, he thought the first priority was education, followed by road repair and health. Now that he was in the government, he realized the absolute need to set up a functioning government. He had to have money to pay salaries to the civil servants, buildings to house ministers, telephones to communicate. He had to restore the supreme court, establish a new central bank, issue currency and build various other governing institutions to strengthen the administrative capacity to work in accordance with law. In several other post-conflict situations, I have tried to help governments start up from scratch, but the Afghan needs seem more vast and dense. It is the legacy of over twenty years of war and devastation. At least, the international community has been mobilizing resources to cover the basic salaries for civil servants for the first few months.

It is important to recognize that the international community has not set up a transitional administration in Afghanistan, as it has done in Cambodia, Kosovo or Timor. It is assisting an Afghan administration to set up institutions which are owned and accountable to the people of Afghanistan. The international community, on their part, should help at the people level to meet their needs and strengthen their capacity. In fact the main current activities of the United Nations are concentrated on humanitarian relief efforts. Access is improving to several areas that were considered unsafe or too remote to reach. Moreover, people who were displaced by war or drought are beginning to move home. There are some one million internally displaced persons whom the government has been very keen to help return. Moreover, there are up to four million refugees in Pakistan and Iran some of whom have started to repatriate. Let me share with you two episodes to illustrate what I consider to be necessary approaches to be taken by international agencies at the people level, i.e. rebuilding communities.

When I opened the Tokyo Reconstruction Conference on 21 January, I spoke to the participants about what I observed upon arrival at the Kabul Bagram airport. We were invited to visit the returning displaced people in the Shomali Plain. We drove along winding roads through devastated fields which had once made the region famous as the “fruit basket” of Afghanistan. Afghan deminers were working on both sides of the road. Against all odds, 109 displaced families totaling some 1,000 members, who had fled the fighting in the Shomali Plain, and taken refuge in Kabul, decided to move back. They apparently felt that peace having arrived, they should go home, no matter how cold and tedious the return trip. UNHCR and partner agencies decided to assist them, as they realized that these people could not make it in one stretch. Their villages were still far beyond the steep hills. The agencies brought tents, food, and household kits, as well as some money to pay for donkeys to transport their belongings. I talked with the returning families about what they planned to do. They answered without hesitation. They wanted to rebuild their houses, start planting in time for the spring season, even go back to animal husbandry.

In the words of the returning displaced people, I saw the first real step towards peace. Since then, many more displaced people are moving back to their original villages. The humanitarian assistance to bring back the displaced families home, should be quickly met by the rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts to build viable villages in the places where they return. There should be shelter, seeds, schools, health clinics, access to water. In short, efforts to reconstruct a full range of village facilities should be brought

in as soon as return movements set in motion. One of the agreed working principles of Afghan reconstruction as it was repeatedly stated in the various fora is, that there should be a seamless transition from emergency humanitarian assistance to reconstruction. In the Shomali Plain, I saw a clear indication of what “seamlessness” signifies. Failing to tackle the vital linkage, the returnees might give up living in the devastated villages and head back to urban areas.

Let me introduce one more story to illustrate. When I visited Herat, the provincial capital in south-west Afghanistan, I was invited to visit a girls’ high school. The building had been restored by a contribution from a European humanitarian organization. Three days ago, experimental classes were opened funded by UNICEF to prepare for the new school year on March 22nd. Rows of students met me in the courtyard. Little girls in their native costumes greeted me with flowers and songs. I visited three classes. Each one struck me for the age variation in the student composition. Girls were prohibited from going to school under the Talibans, so that in the new school year different age group girls would be in all different classes. They were quite lively and responded to my questions. Obviously elated by the prospect of returning to school, one said she wants to be a doctor; another an engineer. I also met the teachers. I asked what they wanted the most. There was a chorus. “Salaries!” They had not been paid for months and years. They needed books and notes. They needed everything. Under the Talibans, some girls tried to continue studying in home schools. One of the teachers present in the meeting said that she had at one point seventy-nine girls coming to her house. When the Talibans discovered that they were running schools, they would order them to be closed. She said she sometimes had to explain that these girls were guests coming to her house on visits. Even the Talibans could not stop guests from coming. I was surprised and moved by the frankness of the conversation. Obviously, the desire for schooling, particularly for girls was strong all through the difficult times. My experienced UNHCR interpreter commented quietly at the end. “This was a good day. Girls are going back to school!”

The stories that I have introduced, “back to home,” or “back to school,” are small projects, and you may wonder what difference they would make to the overall reconstruction of Afghanistan. However, you should appreciate the implied scale of these projects. There are four to five million internally displaced persons and refugees who will be heading home. There are at least one and a half to two million children expected to enroll for the new

school year, with many more to come. There are also high school and university students to consider.

Reconstruction of Afghanistan at the community level means engaging Afghans who have the desire and determination to be part of the contributing elements of their society. What is expected of international assistance is to be close to them to understand their needs and to extend help, but not to impose. The objective of aid is to reinforce Afghan institutions and capacities.

Of course, the reconstruction of Afghanistan requires large infrastructure rebuilding --electricity, water and roads. The international financial institutions are expected to survey, plan and come up with overall recommendations. I hope their plans will be shared as soon as possible. There are many bilateral donors interested in undertaking these projects. Afghanistan will certainly need their investments. The existence of an overall plan can help direct the individual projects in a coordinated overall context. Of particular importance for both the economy and security of Afghanistan is the control of opium poppy cultivation. Provision of alternative crops to farmers as well as establishment of drug law enforcement agencies will be an invaluable part of reconstruction efforts. Needless to say, the demining activities carried out by the United Nations and a corps of some 5000 trained Afghan deminers will have to continue and be enlarged for a long time.

As to Japan's contributions to Afghan reconstruction, the government has pledged a maximum of US 500 million dollars over the course of two and a half years, 250 million dollars of which has been allocated for the year 2002. In addition to responding to share the recurrent cost of the Interim Authority, the priority areas of assistance already designated cover demining, health and education, and repatriation of refugees. Japan is particularly keen to promote the linkage of repatriation and reintegration, as it undertook limited but successful projects in a region called Azra during the difficult Taliban years to reintegrate returning refugees. A unique contribution is underway to cover the rehabilitation of media infrastructure. The current coverage of the Kabul Broadcasting Corporation depends on old equipment donated by Japan in 1977, and is limited to the city boundaries. Television will play a major role in not only building the governing capacity, but also promoting nation-wide teaching to all Afghans. Japan is also assisting quick impact employment providing public works projects for more than 20,000 people in Kabul. A team of economic cooperation specialists are visiting Afghanistan

and consulting with the government. They should be presenting other projects of relevance that will strengthen the governing capacity of the state and also the normal functioning of the lives of the people. Japan will be assisting the longer term reconstruction projects as soon as more detailed needs are determined by the development banks.

So long as the present commitment of the international community is sustained, I think Afghanistan is assured of better days. Japan must maintain the active role that it has taken, well into the future. Action, not words and promises can determine the fate of the Afghans. A peaceful and stable Afghanistan is in the interest not only of their people but also of the entire region and the whole world.