

Afghanistan: 2014 and Beyond

Scribed by Howard Davison

Colonel Abdul Shokoor Azizpoor, an International Fellow at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, gave a presentation on Afghanistan's achievements and challenges. Colonel Azizpoor was born in Kabul, Afghanistan and joined the Northern Alliance in opposition to the Taliban when it came to power in 1996. He gave us an overview of the history, culture, government, and military of Afghanistan; the achievements that have been made in his country since 2001; and the challenges that lie ahead.

Afghanistan, with its capital Kabul City, is 80% mountainous. It is a multi-cultural country of Pashtuns (42%), Tajik's (27%), Hozara (9%) and Uzbek's (9%). Its history began 5,000 years ago, but it did not become "Afghanistan" by name until 1787. After two wars with the British in the 19th century, Afghanistan gained its independence in 1919. From 1979 to 1989, Afghanistan experienced war between Soviet forces and Mujahedeen rebels. From 1979 until 2001, Afghanistan had no nationally agreed-upon government, but the Taliban came to power in 1996 after competing with other factions. The Taliban, an Islamic fundamentalist political movement, supported the Al Qaeda terrorist organization. As a result of the September 11, 2001 Al Qaeda attack on the US and the US led NATO / Allied intervention that followed, the Taliban lost power in Afghanistan.

The Bonn Agreement, which followed the 2001 intervention, established a process for national reconstruction. Hamid Karzai was appointed interim head of the government. Since then Afghanistan has had a number of achievements. They have established a government consisting of executive, legislative, and judicial branches in which officials are elected in multi-party free elections. They have gained freedom of speech. Before 2001 Afghanistan had one radio station and one newspaper. They now have 144 radio stations, 44 TV stations and 200 printed media. Afghanistan has had a history of valuing education for their citizens, but during the Taliban era it was suppressed, especially for women.

Today, an all-time high of over 10 million Afghan children are enrolled in school - 40% of them are girls. The role of women has expanded greatly since 2001 with many women holding political offices as well as positions in the military. Communications have also expanded since 2001. In the Taliban era, Afghans had to go to Pakistan to make a phone call. Now they have five phone companies and over 20 million subscribers. Kabul City, which was in ruins during the Taliban era, has been restored with many new buildings and construction all over the city. Finally, almost 30% of all Afghans now have electricity with several of the major cities having a 24-hour power supply for the first time in decades.

As a result of an agreement at the Bonn 2 Conference in December 2002, Afghanistan created an ethnically balanced voluntary army of 70,000, which later expanded to 195,000. The army depends on US and other western nations for training. Colonel Azizpoor feels it is very important for the US and allies to have a continuing military presence of 10,000 to 15,000 troops in Afghanistan to support the Afghanistan National Army.

Afghanistan has two major challenges going forward: drug trafficking with its accompanying corruption and terrorism. Terrorism is a particularly difficult challenge because it is not easy to identify the enemy. Colonel Azizpoor believes it will be very difficult for Afghanistan to defeat terrorism without the help of the US and its allies.

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