



Middle-East Procurements: Making a Real Difference in Afghanistan



"Afghanistan" in Dari, the official language

When I first arrived in Kabul, loud-speakers attached to the local mosques' minarets sounded the first call to prayer at 4:15 am, urging the faithful to their duty. Muslim clerics set the time seasonally, so first prayer occurs just before dawn. Soon thereafter, the imposing iron gate set into the 15-foot mud-straw security wall surrounding our residence compound squeaked open, just far enough to let workers out to attend mosque services. Then, as it had done virtually every day of my time in Kabul, the power in our part of this ancient city went out.

This was a dramatic beginning to my ensuing adventure. The main source of the country's power is hydroelectric, but Afghanistan, in addition to its many other woes, is in the throes of a five-year drought, severely

affecting the reliability of that power supply. Workers constantly scramble to get generators—usually "less-than-the-state-of-the-art" machines left over from the Soviet occupation—to come to life long enough for the city power to be restored.

Cultural Immersion

Nearly every day I spent there began with these graphic reminders of the major characteristics and issues facing Afghanistan today. I found myself in a strongly Muslim, non-Arab, war-ravaged country that has very real security issues, both in the cities and the countryside, with an infrastructure that is, at best, only marginally meeting the needs of its 25 million inhabitants.

I was there to consult with the Afghan Assistance Coordinating Authority, a World Bank-sponsored "capacity-building" program. My role in this multi-faceted, multi-national organization was to help develop a public procurement program—virtually from scratch—for the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan, replacing the Taliban-era system of governance. I was also there to help train employees of the Afghan government in how to expend public funds and be accountable for such expenditures, by way of a public procurement system that is open, fair, effective, and efficient. These are prerequisites set by most grantor countries and international organizations for the continuation of much-needed aid funds.

Daily Living

I was in Kabul from September 2003 to January 2004. The "learning curve" for living and working in Kabul is reasonably steep. Even for seasoned travelers, it takes some time to navigate the city, learning what not to do and when to avoid certain districts.

Moreover, the everyday living conditions are quite primitive by western standards. I must admit, it takes an occasional experience like this to remind me of the varied human condition around the world and just how fortunate we are in the United States. Yet, I am also reminded of the resiliency of the human spirit: In the midst of so much deprivation and hardship, the Afghans have persevered, retained their perspective on life, and kept their personality as a warm, hospitable, and proud people.

While much has already been done to restore the vitality of this county and this city, there is still much to be done. Mother Teresa once said, "There are no such things as problems. There are only opportunities." If that is the standard, then Afghanistan is truly a "land of opportunity."

From a perspective born of my recent experience there, however, I would have to say that Afghanistan is a very difficult place to be. It takes survivor skills to subsist in many places in the country. A child dies there every five minutes and a woman every 10 minutes from diseases that are treatable if not preventable—dysentery, cholera, typhoid, polio, meningitis, and malaria.

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The average life expectancy for Afghans is not much beyond 40 years. An announcement of pregnancy for the mother-to-be in many places in Afghanistan is tantamount to being told that she has only a 50-percent chance of surviving childbirth, a 25-percent chance that both she and her baby will survive to see his or her first birthday, and only a 25-percent chance that her child will live to see its fifth birthday.

As a former military officer, I have been to many places and seen many things, but I have never seen anything quite like Afghanistan. It is heart-breaking to see the conditions under which some people live there.

State of Infrastructures

The political-military environment in Afghanistan is also far from settled. While Kabul is relatively “secure,” warlords still control much if not most of the country. Pitched battles can and do still occur in the countryside and mountain regions as ancient tribal divisions still persist.

The Taliban are far from removed as a threat, not only to the U.S./NATO presence but also to the Afghans themselves. Taliban political assassinations are not an uncommon occurrence in the regions and villages outside of Kabul, especially in the aftermath of the Constitutional Loya Jirga’s call for national elections. Many of the highways are barely passable, with travelers under constant threat of Taliban/al Qaida (or even brigand) attack. Afghanistan is the most heavily mined country in the world—approximately 100 people a month, mostly children, are severely injured in mine explosions.

Very few cities have witnessed as many dramatic changes and withstood as much destruction as Kabul has since the 1960s. When former King Zahir Shah returned to his capital to form an interim government after nearly 30 years in exile, he and President Hamid Karzai were well aware of those changes. They knew what must be done to restore this country to a reasonable standard of

living. Within days of the Taliban’s retreat, even though most of the people were desperately poor, the bazaars began to spontaneously appear. Music was heard on the streets, women began to rejoin visible society (including the workplace), schools reopened, and much-needed hospitals and clinics steadily increased in number.

There should also be no mistake about the value placed on freedom in Afghanistan—the people of Afghanistan fully understand its meaning. They know that they have been freed from one of the most repressive regimes in the recent history of mankind, and that this was made possible largely by

U.S. action. Religion confuses matters, certainly, but the Afghans I talked to have no doubt about the great gift they have been given, initially by the United States, who help to maintain it alongside NATO forces.

Looking Forward

The future “success” of this country now depends, in very large measure, on establishing and maintaining a fully functioning public procurement system. Funds must be made available for genuine reconstruction work, which includes the following:



A typical structure within Kabul—virtually destroyed from warfare, but still being used.

- Removing the plague of mines infesting the cities and the countryside,
- Providing safe water supplies and sewerage systems,
- Ensuring reliable electricity and developing a nationwide telephone communications network, and
- Rebuilding the battered roadways.

All of these are critical to internal and external communion and commerce.

Here, there is some good news. The major relief organizations of the world community are actively engaged in the assistance process. The World Bank, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the World Health Organization (WHO), the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and others (including numerous NGOs) are working hard to make things better.

Just as I left Afghanistan, for example, USAID announced funding for the

construction of 100 clinics nationwide. Roadways are being repaired and constructed, schools have reopened, there are plans to bring in a reliable supply of medicines and develop safe drinking water sources, and women are now permitted back into the work environment. But, these activities must be conducted through a public procurement system, maintained and administered fairly by procurement professionals who can deliver projects on time, on budget, and without taint of fraud, corruption, or waste.

Closing the Journal

Even though things are moving forward, there is much to do. It will take decades to see any real improvement in Afghans' day-to-day lives. The task is made so much more daunting, of course, because of the active armed resistance of the Taliban, al Qaida, and foreign fighters. Each of these groups has a vested interest in disrupting the upcoming scheduled elections and otherwise preventing

the success of the new government, doing what they can to interrupt procurement activities and projects meant to bring relief and better conditions to the people.

For me, this assignment proved to be a very memorable experience—even an adventure—and I am pleased to have been able to make whatever contribution I could to such a worthy effort. It also underscored the importance of having a fully functioning public procurement system. It is only though such a system, in which donor nations and institutions can have confidence, that real progress in Afghanistan, or other countries similarly situated, can be made. *CM*

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