

Nation in peril: Dispatch from Kabul

by [Chris Herlinger](#) in the [March 11, 2008](#) issue

At a center in Kabul for children affected by violence, a mother of one of the children cut through the niceties of the meeting—and the tradition of Afghan women being self-effacing—by declaring bitterly, “We hate this country and want to leave. There are no jobs here.” That angry declaration came amid growing concerns about Afghanistan’s insecurity and inadequate infrastructure.

When I visited Kabul in late 2007 I saw signs of progress over what I saw in 2002. Kabul’s streets were livelier and markets fuller. Two segments of the economy seemed to be booming: the construction industry and the wedding industry (enormous buildings are going up in the center of Kabul to provide space for that beloved Afghan institution, the wedding banquet). It was a surprise to find Kabul with a shopping center equipped with a cash machine that, tellingly, dispenses both Afghan and U.S. currencies.

Yet it was dismaying to see how little progress had been made in other areas. Some six years after the Taliban’s military defeat, an event hailed by the U.S. as the harbinger of good days ahead, huge swaths of Kabul—nearly half of the city, I was told—are without regular access to electricity. Though select parts of Kabul sport high-end coffee bars and opulent houses (many of them rumored to belong to drug lords or war lords), many Afghans think they are no better off than they were seven years ago.

A report by the United Nations Development Program noted progress in economic reforms, education and access to health care, but warned that “the needs of many remain unfulfilled.” (One example: schooling for girls in rural areas faces new threats from the Taliban, which is growing in strength.) Perhaps most worrying, the UN report said that based on such benchmarks as health and education, Afghanistan’s “human development index” is the lowest in the region. The UN report placed the country 174th out of 178 countries surveyed. The only four countries with lower indicators than Afghanistan are in sub-Saharan Africa.

A report by Oxfam Great Britain pointed to how some of the \$15 billion in international assistance channeled to the country since the fall of the Taliban has been used. Citing inefficient or ineffective programs, the Oxfam report was particularly critical of aid that had been “absorbed by profits of companies and subcontractors, by non-Afghan resources and by high expatriate salaries and living costs.”

Some Afghans, of course, are benefiting from rehabilitation programs that have worked well, which are often those done on a small scale and in concert with local Afghan groups. Faqirullah Hamidi, 45, a stay-at-home father because of war wounds he suffered during the Soviet occupation, lives with his wife, Nafisa, a government employee, and the couple’s eight children on the outskirts of Kabul. The family resides in a two-room home built with support from Church World Service and its partner, the Afghan Development Association. Hamidi said his family’s years of displacement and search for a permanent home now appear to be over.

Yet Hamidi told me his family’s feeling settled is a small part of an uncompleted story for Afghanistan as a whole. “We want a secure country; we want peace in this country; we want development in this country,” he said. Hamidi’s hopes reveal the problem: how is it possible to obtain security, peace and development in a country where people feel less safe than they did in 2002, with the upswing of suicide bombings and acts of terror in Kabul and other urban centers, and a growing presence by the Taliban?

Some Afghans praise the U.S. and NATO military presence for providing the only basis for security. Others tell stories of civilian deaths caused by U.S. and NATO aerial bombings and the perceived impropriety of troops’ behavior—entering a home without being invited, for example—that do not endear the troops to Afghans. Still others point out that Afghanistan will not be secure until neighboring Pakistan is secure—an opinion that now seems incontestable given Pakistan’s worsening political crises. One Pakistani humanitarian worker with long experience in Kabul (who did not want to be identified by name) told me bluntly that Afghanistan has become “just one example where the international community, without understanding the context and history, has once again gone wrong.”

Whatever their views, Afghans and those who have worked alongside them are well aware of the history of failure by outside forces trying to exert control over Afghanistan. Middle-aged Afghans fondly recall the 1960s and early 1970s as an era

marked not by the presence of occupying forces but instead by American teachers and engineers working alongside Afghans.

During a meeting in a newly constructed government office building, Naseer Ah Popal, an official of an Afghan government rehabilitation and development ministry, pointed to me, a civilian American connected with a humanitarian organization, and said, “Before, there were Americans like you here. Now there are Americans with guns, and that doesn’t always create a good image.”

A colleague whose work takes him to many of Afghanistan’s rural areas told me that the country’s foundational problem is what the mother in Kabul identified: an embittering mix of economic penury, unemployment, dislocation and hopelessness. “Poverty is the source of the instability,” my colleague said. “People feel, ‘Why not join the Taliban? We have nothing to lose.’”