

Globalization and Change in Central Asia

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The United States is committed to helping Central Asia become a stable, peaceful, prosperous region. U.S. interests in the region are threefold:

- ✚ preventing the spread of terrorism,
- ✚ providing tools for political and economic reform and institution of the rule of law, and
- ✚ Ensuring the security and transparent development of Caspian energy reserves.

In order to achieve these goals, the United States is increasing military and counter-terrorism cooperation as well as pressing for fundamental political, economic, and societal reforms and for the development of increased respect for human rights, including women's rights.

The United States is committed to a single, successful model of human progress, one based on the non-negotiable demands of human dignity: the rule of law, limits on the power of the state, respect for women and private property and free speech and equal justice and religious tolerance. America cannot impose this vision. Yet, we can support and reward governments that make the right choices for their own people. President Bush has said that, In our development aid, in our diplomatic efforts, in our international broadcasting, and in our educational assistance, the United States will promote moderation and tolerance and human rights. And we will defend the peace that makes all progress possible.

As Secretary Powell pointed out in his speech commemorating International Women's Day last year, Women's issues affect not only women; they have profound implications for all humankind. Women's issues are human rights issues. We, as a world community, can not even begin to tackle the array of problems and challenges confronting us without the full and equal participation of women in all aspects of life."

My office at the State Department is thus firmly committed to promoting the human rights of women worldwide. In this context, we are working in close conjunction with the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan, focusing on enhancing women's economic opportunities and increasing their political participation. This is important for both women and Afghan society, and makes economic sense. No state can afford to ignore the economic and intellectual potential of half of its citizens and hope to prosper. These are areas Afghan women have also identified as important to them.

The fall of the Taliban provided an opportunity for change in Afghanistan, particularly with respect to the country's women. Though the situations of the new independent states were very different, in the early 1990s the states of Central Asia also had to deal with some of the same challenges that Afghanistan faces now in drafting a new constitution, introducing a new judicial system, defining the investment climate, and setting up a network of relations with neighboring states and other world powers.

In Afghanistan, as in Central Asia, the status of women is a critical barometer that measures the defining elements of social philosophy, and any discussion of the status of women reflects a much wider framework for defining society. It is not only about gender roles, but is also linked to a much larger set of issues about personal life, national identity and the role of religion in the state.

The importance of women participating in political life cannot be overestimated, for their sake as well as that of society. While democratic institutions, constitutions, and independent judiciaries are extremely important, women also need to stay active in parliaments and local politics in order to shape the public policies that affect them. I have seen research that asserts that true leadership capacity exists in five percent of the general population. Half of that five percent is women. This is not reflected in the composition of national leadership in this region, or around the world.

Just three weeks ago, I visited Afghanistan, where I saw firsthand the remarkable results Afghan women have achieved in a relatively short time. Even since my last visit in July, they have made great progress. But much remains to be done. One of the keys to the success they have achieved is that the United States supports strategies identified by the Afghan government to reach our common goal of restoring women to their rightful roles in society.

My trip was made in connection with a meeting in Kabul of the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council. This is a public-private partnership that aims to mobilize resources and expertise to aid Afghan women in practical ways. It was created by Presidents Bush and Karzai one year ago, and is run by my office. In addition to funding by Congress, we also have the support of private donors.

For example, some companies, along with several leading state colleges, have made generous donations of web design, computers, training programs, brainstorming and mentoring time by top executives, and related support that is literally worth more than money can buy. While in Afghanistan Under Secretary of State Paula Dobriansky announced that the United States would contribute \$2.5 million in support of the creation of Women Resource Centers in 14 provinces in Afghanistan, and that the Council would contribute \$1 million more in support of educational programs at these Centers.

Post-September 11 Changes and Central Asian Links

September 11 set into motion a series of changes that provided new opportunities to improve the status of women. This involves choices between alternative frameworks. In both Afghanistan and Central Asia, women's rights has a message between the lines connected to the relative roles of Islamic values, secular Western views, or the principles of socialism. Attitudes towards girls education and employment opportunities for women outside the home reflect a fundamental position on preferred nature of society, and the role of women is part of a larger ideological debate between traditionalists and modernist forces.

Not long ago Afghanistan was a country still mired in decades of conflict, suffering under a brutally repressive Taliban regime that committed human rights abuses on a dramatic scale. Afghan women were oppressed, girls were denied an education, religious minorities were persecuted, and the country was a haven for drug traffickers and terrorists.

I would like to provide for you some background on the role of Central Asian states in the events creating transition in Afghanistan. Soon after September 11, the governments of Central Asia all offered assistance to prosecute the war against terrorism. All the Central Asian states quickly joined the coalition and offered to help. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were the first to offer the use of their facilities to U.S. and coalition troops. Both played central roles as staging areas for our crucial early operations against al-Qa ida and the Taliban. The bombing campaign in Afghanistan began on October 7, 2001, literally an hour after Uzbekistan and the United States signed the Status of Forces Agreement that provided the legal basis for the United States to carry out search and rescue missions from Karshi-Khanabad airbase.

All governments in the region provided blanket over flight rights, and Turkmenistan and Tajikistan facilitated the transfer of humanitarian aid into Afghanistan in the first few months of the effort. While several countries offered airbases for the long-term prosecution of the war, Manas, the civilian airport serving Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, was chosen to be the primary base for coalition air support for our troops in Afghanistan. We also obtained agreement to refuel aircraft at the Dushanbe and Ashgabat airports. Kazakhstan provided landing rights for any coalition aircraft forced to divert from Manas due to inclement weather or technical emergencies. All of the countries of Central Asia have assured us of their continued cooperation in the global war on terrorism and until Afghanistan achieves stability.

Now the Taliban regime is history. The role played by Central Asian states complemented and supported the efforts of the coalition partners in Operation Enduring Freedom, to successfully dislodge the Taliban regime, enabling Afghanistan to move into a new phase. With the success of the military operation, events in the political arena assumed center stage. The Bonn Conference marked successful negotiations leading to a peaceful transition establishing the Afghan Interim Government headed by Hamid Karzai. It provided for the convening of an emergency Loya Jirga, for the drafting of a new constitution, and the holding of elections in 2004, which are scheduled for June 4.

Simultaneously our engagement with the Central Asian states expanded. The Presidents of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan were invited to the United States, and numerous Congressional delegations and cabinet secretaries have visited the region. When President Rakhmonov of Tajikistan came to Washington in December, announcements were made of the appointment of the first Tajik Ambassador in Washington and the beginning of construction of a new U.S. Embassy in Dushanbe -- both important signals after 11 years of independence that demonstrate the growing relationship. Our assistance budgets for most of the countries increased significantly. The states of Central Asia have been excellent partners in the war against terrorism and they have welcomed our contribution to their security.

Legal Framework -- The Constitution

To come back to the political developments in Afghanistan, under the Bonn Agreement, the drafting and adoption of a new Constitution is one of the major tasks to be organized under the leadership of the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan during its two-year tenure. The new constitution will form the legal foundation for the government of Afghanistan and thus, will be vital in defining the status of women

in society. In light of Afghanistan's history, the establishment of a new Afghan constitution is an important opportunity to establish the necessary guarantees for women's rights.

The Bonn Agreement stipulated that the new constitution and legal framework be drafted in accordance with Islamic principles, international standards, the rule of law and Afghan legal traditions. For many years Islam was used in Afghanistan as the justification for policies that denied rights and access to education and employment to women and girls, and the Taliban based its excesses on its interpretation of what was supposedly Islam. But Islamic scholars and experts agree that Islamic principles do not warrant such treatment -- women in the Koran such as Khadijah and Aisha were active, educated and productive, and women throughout the Moslem world have more rights than the Taliban permitted.

The question of who interprets Islam will have a critical impact on the success of drafting a constitution in accordance with Islamic principles that is at the same time consistent with ensuring that the human rights of women are respected in Afghanistan.

As Afghanistan goes about writing its new constitution, they have a historic and important opportunity for making a lasting contribution to guarantee the rights of all its citizens, including women and minorities. The United States government is committed to assisting Afghanistan to establish rule of law. The nine-member Constitutional Drafting Commission is now working on the task of drafting a new constitution. Due to the previous violations of women's basic rights, it is essential that attention be given to promoting and guaranteeing those rights in the new legal framework of Afghanistan.

In order to leave the door open to draft legislation or other implementing regulations pertaining to personal status and other issues of rights of women later, the focus must now begin at the constitutional level. Since the constitution provides the basic framework for articulating the rights of individuals and their relations with the state, the protection of women's human rights must be enshrined in that framework.

The 1964 Constitution of Afghanistan under King Zahir Shah is generally cited as one of the most progressive of its time. It provided for basic civil rights, and granted political freedoms, guaranteeing freedom of thought and expression, as well as freedom of association, and certain basic social rights including free education. When it came to women, it is generally viewed as liberal because it guaranteed the rights of all citizens, even without specifically mentioning women.

While constitutions and legal reform do not necessarily change social practice, such declaratory statements do set a backdrop of normative expectations. Constitutions that expressly guarantee the rights of certain individuals provide the framework to protect those individuals more effectively, particularly if they have been discriminated against in the past. Once the initial draft is done, and we anticipate that it might be ready in March, it will be reviewed by a larger 29-member Constitutional Review Commission, whose composition should be announced in the coming days.

The constitutions of the other Central Asian states all specifically provide for equality of women before the law. However, despite the constitutional guarantees, the annual State Department Human Rights reports for each of the five Central Asian

states, note that violence against women, particularly domestic violence, was a problem and that there continued to be significant traditional, societal discrimination against women.

History shows that legal change is usually more successful when it follows, rather than leads, public opinion. As was the case with domestic violence in this country, laws alone are not enough to change society. As Justice Sandra Day O'Connor has said when courts and legislatures reach out to protect what society does not believe merits protection, such protection typically falls flat. It is not until general public opinion favors the strict enforcement of laws on the books that real advances can take root. So focusing only on the Constitution is not sufficient - we need to work together to improve understanding in society as well.

Legal Reforms and the Rule of Law

The overthrow of the Taliban and the establishment of the Karzai government was a regime change so sweeping in tone, that after the introduction of a new constitution, Afghanistan will also require new civil code and penal code.

Afghanistan needs to develop a functioning system of rule of law. Legal reforms are important for the whole society, but can also serve as one of the key routes for improving the status of women.

Some of the defining issues for women in Afghanistan will be reflected in the balance between Islamic personal status laws and the civil law code regulating personal and family relations and equalizing the duties and responsibilities of the sexes in society. One obvious example is the question of polygamy, which is legally prohibited in the countries of Central Asia, but is permitted in Afghanistan.

While the legal structure in Afghanistan forbids forced marriage, work remains to be done. Some Afghan women are campaigning on this issue, arguing that forced marriage of women should be openly condemned as a criminal offence. The U.S. continues to support the Afghan government's efforts to combat this practice.

USAID supports gender legal specialists in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to improve the legal status of women. Through seminars and training programs, legal professionals are educated on issues such as domestic violence and spousal rape. USAID also supports a legal literacy program in Uzbekistan that trains rural residents on the principles of gender equality. Alumni of this project are now serving in positions with several local governments in Uzbekistan.

In addressing the legal code, one related issue for women in Afghanistan is that of illegal divorce. Women fleeing intolerable situations in a forced marriage can be apprehended, often at the request of their husbands or family members, and imprisoned for illegal divorce, which in the Middle East is known as the House of Obedience laws. This is another example of personal status issues for women, which can best be remedied through changes in the legal code.

Perceived options for women wishing to flee forced or oppressive marriages are limited. There are reports in Afghanistan of self-immolation, and recent news stories cited more than 100 female burn cases this year received at Heart Public Hospital, mostly women between 14 and 20 years old. It is likely that most victims never make it to the hospital. This is striking because of its similarity to reports of self-

immolation from Central Asia, predominantly in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. After marriage many women or girls move into the husband's home where they occupy the lowest rung on the family social ladder.

A conflict with the husband or mother-in-law, who by tradition exercises complete control over the young bride, is usually the stimulus for the suicide, though there are no accurate statistics, as the majority of cases go unreported.

Economic Participation

One of the most important priorities for my office is increasing women's participation in the economic life of their countries. This is not only important to bolstering a country's economy, it also helps sustain the millions of individuals who are dependent upon women in female-headed households, either because they are war widows, or because these households are without an able-bodied male of working age. Though Afghan women had made some limited progress in entering the economic sphere in the decades before the war, over the last several decades of political violence and Taliban rule, women have been marginalized from productive employment.

One major success since the fall of the Taliban is that women are now officially permitted to work outside the home. Small businesses such as beauty parlors are beginning to open, and a host of humanitarian aid projects target women as planners, implementers, and beneficiaries. Employment opportunities are limited, and in many families male family members may disapprove. That is why many projects aimed at women are focused on traditional skills like carpet making or handicrafts. Women can also start small, home-based businesses to produce commercial items such as baked goods or prepared take-out food for weddings or tailoring. But, women also need job skills training that will open up access to a range of non-traditional fields, such as, perhaps radio or wrist watch repair.

One step to improving economic participation for women and improving individual livelihoods is to stimulate the growth of small business through access to credit. Microfinance programs provide opportunities for self-employment and allow entrepreneurs to get started, or to expand businesses, create jobs and increase income.

USAID supports microfinance programs in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. With approximately 90% of all micro-loans going to women, these programs focus on disadvantaged groups who are unable to secure financing from the formal financial sector for both start-up and established enterprises. In addition to providing micro-loans, these programs also provide business training in various skills including bookkeeping, marketing, and business plan development.

Programs in Central Asia demonstrate how effective micro credit can be in the region. USAID's program for the Central Asian republics has already given loans to some 30,000 clients, most of whom are women.

I would like to tell you one success story which we heard from FINCA, an NGO that currently serves more than 13,000 clients with nearly 100% repayment rates each month in Kyrgyzstan:

Sonya has lived her whole life in a small farming town some 40 kilometers from the regional capital, Osh. It was here that she grew up, married, raised eight children and worked on the local collective farm. It was also here that she expected to enjoy her retirement subsidized by the state.

After the Kyrgyz Republic declared independence in 1991, resources for the state budget shrank and pensions stagnated. For most retirees, the state pension was no longer sufficient, so they must look for other sources of income. For many, this means selling goods at the local market. Sonya began selling pistachios at the local produce market in 1994. She began her business with only a small bag of nuts and trade was difficult. She could not afford to rent a space in the produce hall, so she sold her pistachios from a little table outside the building throughout the blistering summer and frigid winter.

In 1996, Sonya heard about the FINCA micro-credit program, and together with eleven other women, she decided to form a banking group. Sonya received a first loan of \$40, and she used the money to buy more pistachios to sell. Over time, loan amounts and her business grew. Sonya added dried fruits, honey, walnuts, and other products to her inventory and was eventually able to rent a table in the market hall.

Working with credit was not without difficulties, however. Soon after her group took out its first loan from FINCA, the group disbanded as several members left. Sonya and a few of her colleagues managed to gather new members and reform the group. Over the past year, the group has solidified its membership, solved internal problems and, without interruption, received credit as needed while increasing their savings. In June 1998, Sonya received a FINCA loan of \$630. She looks forward to expanding her business by producing and selling eggs, and by providing employment for her daughters-in-law.

Sonya and her husband live together with their two married sons, two daughters-in-law and five grandchildren. Because her sons have little opportunity for employment except for seasonal field labor, Sonya and her husband provide for the extended family. Through her business profits, several of her daughters have been able to move to the capital, Bishkek, to study. Although Sonya's retirement will have to wait, she is happy that she has been able to provide for her growing family during difficult times.

Stimulating economic participation for women in Central Asia is a lot easier than in Afghanistan, as the cultural norms are not as restrictive. Though the impact of the Soviet years is such that there was little tradition of private enterprise and the principles of the profit motive, women are accepted as vendors in the markets, and thus can more easily run shops and businesses.

The U.S. Government views microfinance initiatives as a highly desirable way to assist people who have little access to usual capital channels, especially women in underdeveloped countries, because access to loans and other services stimulates sustainable financial independence. In 2002, USAID spent approximately \$160 million on micro enterprise in some 50 countries. Since the fall of the Taliban, several NGOs have begun micro enterprise programs in Afghanistan. We anticipate that the need for micro credit will increase in Afghanistan as women seek to play a role in the economic life of their country.

Families Dependent on Women

Widows and female-headed households are a particularly vulnerable group, in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and around the world. Estimates of the number of widows in Afghanistan vary, but it is likely to be as many as 1- 2 million. Widows face their own particular set of problems in a patriarchic society, owing to the lack of a male intermediary, which affects their access to social services, and are particularly disadvantaged in the economic sphere. Widows thus have strong needs for assistance in learning skills to help them be able to support their families. Several programs supported by the USG target the needs of these women. Two particular programs that I had the opportunity to visit when I was in Afghanistan last month are:

A State Department/PRM funded project through Church World Services (CWS) that targets nearly 2000 female heads of household in Kabul for literacy training and income generating activities. Vulnerable women are making quilts, which are distributed, to hospitals, returnees and disaster victims to protect them from harsh winter conditions. The women have already produced about 50,000 quilts, with plans to make a total of 135,000. The majority of the beneficiaries are widows, women with disabled husbands, returnees and internally displaced persons. Some of these women also participate in literacy classes run at these project centers.

* Widows Bakeries -- USAID-donated wheat supports the World Food Program (WFP) in providing a daily ration of bread to approximately one quarter of a million highly vulnerable people living in Afghanistan's major cities. Of the 117 bakeries in operation, 57 are run and managed by women. In addition to the 25 women's bakeries in Kabul, there are bakery projects in Mazar and Kandahar. WFP is currently expanding the bakery program to Herat city. The women's bakeries generally employ vulnerable women, usually widows who are paid a monthly wage in cash. Since May 2002, the bakeries and its funds are completely self-managed, with WFP limiting its role to oversight support and training of bakery managers, monitoring of bakery operations and beneficiary selection, and exploring alternatives to help make the bakeries sustainable enterprises in the future.

Central Asia - Afghan Trade

In looking at the region, one key issue I want to discuss is cross-border trade. War-torn Afghanistan has been cut off from other markets, and building its economy is thus inherently linked to reinvigorating trade throughout the region. Afghanistan and the countries of Central Asia share limited domestic markets, distant export markets, and dependence on a limited number of export commodities. Solutions to these problems that factor in a regional perspective will have better chances of success.

Stability in Afghanistan will permit greater openings for trade. There have been some imports from Central Asia, Russia and China, as well as imports from Iran to the west and Pakistan to the east. As demonstrated by their roles as staging grounds for transportation during military actions, Central Asian states will profit significantly from the ability to use transit routes through Afghanistan. We are looking for ways to work with Central Asian states and Afghanistan to identify and remove trade barriers.

Tajikistan is building bridges across the Amu Daria to facilitate transportation and trade, as they seek to establish trade links with Afghanistan. The new bridges will

enable humanitarian aid and trade to move more easily into Afghanistan. The two countries recently signed an agreement, which will see the construction of five bridges and a major repair program for the badly damaged roads running from the port town of Sher Khan Bandar to the northern town of Kunduz: the bulk of these projects will be funded by the multilateral banks, but the United States Government is also contributing millions of dollars towards bridge construction to help link Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

Opportunities for fruitful cooperation between Afghanistan and Central Asia abound, and some excellent starts have been made. One example is in Kyrgyzstan, where a Soros Foundation program is sponsoring a group of Afghan women studying at American University of Central Asia. Many of the people who have worked in NGOs in Central Asia have gained experience that is relevant for dealing with democracy building and development in Afghanistan. Though Afghanistan has its own social and political specifications, many elements of programs run in Central Asia could be applied south of the border. I am also thinking particularly of organizations that have worked in Tajikistan, where the linguistic overlap gives special potential for Tajiks and Afghans to work together. Central Asians I have spoken to indicate a huge interest in being involved in Afghanistan reconstruction. Government representatives, NGOs, educators, and businesspeople, would like to support education, and invite Afghan girls to study in their universities, among other things. Due to cultural and geographic closeness, the possibilities are numerous.

Education/Literacy

Access to education is a prerequisite for change in women's status in Afghanistan. One of the most pressing needs right now is for literacy education. In Afghanistan it is estimated that some 90% of the women are illiterate. The need is clearly great. As Secretary Powell said last year, dramatically increasing literacy among women and girls must be a major global priority. How do you do that? My short answer is, one country at a time – in the sense that each one requires a tailor-made approach.

This past March, when the Afghan school year began, an all-time high of 3 million children returned to school nationwide, far exceeding best estimates of only half that number. Now, the current estimate is that the number of students beginning school in March 2003 may even be as high as 4.5 million. It appears that war-weary parents have now realized that educating their children is the best key to a brighter future.

As students pour back to school by the millions, now, for the first time in years, girls also have the opportunity to obtain an education, and women teachers once barred from the classroom by the Taliban, have returned. Many times more girls are enrolled in school now than at any time in all of Afghanistan's history. In the Kabul area, about 50% of newly enrolled students were girls, but rural statistics are not so favorable. The process of returning girls to schools in such unprecedented numbers has not been without difficulties, and several girls schools have been attacked by arsonists or rocketed. Though there are some hard-line opponents to schooling for girl's education, recent opinion polls do show strong overall support for it.

One unique aspect of education in Afghanistan is the surfeit of overage first graders caused by the Taliban's prohibition on girls education. Approximately one-third of the first grade students are overage. Many, particularly girls, are 10-14. The Ministry of Education has developed a program aimed at these overage students

known as the Accelerated Learning Program, which we support.

I should mention, as proof of how seriously we take education, that USAID has just finalized a three-year package of \$60.5 million in support for education in Afghanistan and \$100 million to Pakistan.

The countries of Central Asia have also wrestled with the problems of literacy. In the 1920s and 30s a massive network of literacy schools, known as likbezi, were set up, and at this point can boast an educational system that has produced a society where greater than 99 percent of the women have basic literacy skills. I hope that Afghanistan will some day be able to boast similar achievements in literacy.

In sum, we are intensifying our efforts to empower women around the world, and in particular working hard in Afghanistan. I will just end by saying that this is a challenging but definitely not a thankless task. When I was in Afghanistan last month, we asked a girl in one of the literacy classes we sponsor if she knew what she wanted to do afterward. Yes, she said, I want to decide what to study, where to work, and whom to marry! Society as a whole, whether American, Afghan, Uzbek, Tajik, or other can benefit immeasurably from a climate in which all persons, regardless of gender, have the opportunity to earn respect, responsibility, advancement, and remuneration based on ability.

Thank you and good night.