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### SECURING COMMUNITIES FOR RECONSTRUCTION IN AFGHANISTAN: A Summary of Interviews and Discussions with Community and NGO Leaders

#### Background

This report summarizes the principal results of a series of conversations with Afghans in Kabul and Peshawar in March and April 2002. In Kabul, the HPCR conducted a series of interviews as well as group discussions with community leaders. In Peshawar, the Program hosted a two-day roundtable discussion with 15 leaders of Afghan non-governmental organizations.



#### KEY MESSAGES

Four key messages emerged from the discussions, and can be summarized as follows:

1. **Insecurity remains in much of Afghanistan, but Kabul has been well secured by ISAF and people remain optimistic about the future.** The situation today seems qualitatively different from other points of transition in recent Afghan history (particularly 1992 and 1995). The clear process for political change outlined in Bonn and the

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international military presence in Kabul has generated a sense of optimism, even if widespread security has not yet been achieved in most of Afghanistan.

- 2. Afghans want and will choose peace, but only if security is understood broadly and all of its causes are addressed.** Peace will not be sustainable if security is understood to be exclusively, or even primarily, a military or police issue. Achieving security requires addressing all the sources of human vulnerability, including lack of economic opportunities, social dissolution, poor health and education services, and environmental disasters. Indeed, physical security is as much a prerequisite for peace and development as a consequence of them; therefore, development and reconstruction must begin quickly to address all sources of insecurity.
- 3. Responses to insecurity must be made at four levels simultaneously: individual, community, national, and global.** Since security is an outcome of many factors, it can only be achieved by moving on several fronts at once. At the *individual* level, a mindset of violence must be transformed into a culture of peace and tolerance; local *community* structures for decision making and collective action must be strengthened and legitimized; credible *national* infrastructure such as the police, army and legal system must be established; and *neighboring countries and global powers* must make an explicit commitment to fostering peace in Afghanistan and together build mechanisms for regional collaboration.
- 4. International aid must be coordinated, made accountable to Afghans, strengthen local and national capacity, and focus on the whole country, rather than just on Kabul, and the establishment of national institutions.** An unintended consequence of the rapid increase in international support for Afghanistan has been that the government and many local NGOs have lost key staff to the international effort, forcing long-established local NGOs to close down. This has created an anxiety that international support is weakening rather than supporting local capacity, the latter of which is all that Afghans will be able to rely on when the international community turns its attention away from Afghanistan. Moreover, the international community appears to have a bias toward funding the establishment of national infrastructure, but without strong local community structures, peace and security will not be sustainable.

## DISCUSSION

### **Insecurity remains, but there is optimism for the future.**

When asked to assess the current security situation in Afghanistan, participants uniformly expressed concern that insecurity continued to prevail in most parts of the country, especially outside Kabul. Nonetheless, participants also noted a sense of optimism in the country that itself seemed to mitigate at least some security concerns.

The security situation in Afghanistan was believed to be better today than during parallel transitions in 1992 and 1995. This is partly due to the relative stability in Kabul that has inspired a modicum of confidence and comfort in the rest of the country. The security role of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was uniformly, if cautiously, recognized as being a critical ingredient of the stability and safety in and around Kabul. Though people in Kabul appear to feel largely safe, armed gangs continue to operate, and crime — especially murder and armed robberies — continues to be

of concern. The police are seen as complicit with armed groups and different factional interests; therefore, ISAF will continue to be critical until a more robust and neutral police infrastructure can be established. On a related note, the humanitarian work being performed by ISAF, while appreciated, seemed to create confusion about ISAF's role in Afghanistan and raised concerns about the role of international *armed* forces being involved in activities other than security.

The presence of a clear political process as articulated in Bonn also appears to be an important ingredient in the current stability; it has given the population hope in the future, so that even those who are not satisfied with the political compromise embodied in the Afghan Interim Administration (AIA) seem willing to let the process take its course. However, a general distrust toward any central administration does exist among some Afghans. This distrust is strengthened by a perception that the current AIA is controlled by one faction and is distributing aid to further its political goals. In addition, while people are generally aware of the Loya Jirga process that is underway, very little public, official information seems to have reached people even on the outskirts of Kabul, which threatens to disenfranchise non-Kabul Afghanistan from the political process.

The relative optimism, confidence, and political peace prevailing in Afghanistan create a unique window of opportunity for transformation. Participants suggested that people in Afghanistan were willing to accept changes in traditional practices and mindsets — especially with respect to the prevailing culture of war and conflict — and so the NGO community and others must move quickly to support a series of psychological and cultural transformations that would help make peace sustainable. Moreover, the improvement in the security situation relative to the situation obtained in 1992 and 1995 creates a space for reconstruction as the population waits to see the practical results of the new political settlement. Anxiety remained, however, that if the reconstruction process did not yield at least some clear impact quickly, the AIA and its international supporters would lose credibility and the situation could deteriorate. In this sense, long term security around the country is contingent on the pace of recovery.

**Security encompasses more than just physical protection and has several sources.**

Participants clearly expressed that security must be understood broadly if it is to be sustainable. Thus, security is more than simply threats to body and property, but includes other significant human vulnerabilities that have similar psychological and social implications. In this regard, participants pointed to threats to survival arising out of the inability to meet basic material needs such as food, water, shelter, and basic health care as well as basic non-material needs such as human dignity, political freedom, and freedom from fear. The recent and devastating earthquake in northern Afghanistan and the ongoing drought are reminders that vulnerability to environmental calamities is also a deep source of insecurity.

The single most important source of insecurity identified was lack of economic opportunity. Violence, coercion, and widespread possession of arms were all seen as a consequence of the lack of viable income-generating alternatives to war. When basic material needs are at risk of not being met, people are simply more willing to turn to violence. One participant cited a study that demonstrated that 90% of the crime committed in Kabul was attributable to economic rather than to ethnic or political motives. In short, Afghans would choose peace if they could afford to. Nonetheless, others

suggested that ethnic tensions continue to be a significant source of violence and that troop commanders were exploiting ethnic rivalries to maintain control in particular areas of the country.

Insecurity is also fueled by political instability at the center that depletes people's confidence in the capacity of the state to provide protection to its citizens. The result is that people will continue to bear arms and default to self-help measures to protect themselves.

**Insecurity must be addressed at the individual, community, national, and global levels.**

Securing communities is a challenge that must be met at four levels simultaneously: individual, community, national, and global.

At the level of the **individual**, participants recognized the critical need to begin changing the mindsets and habits of violent conflict that had set in over two decades of war in Afghanistan. An entire generation of young people in Afghanistan knows nothing but war, and their outlook and practices will not be transformed simply by virtue of a new political settlement or the presence of a few thousand international soldiers. Peace education initiatives through schools, community institutions, and mass media can play a key role in nurturing a culture of tolerance that will contribute to security.

At the level of the **community**, it is of central importance to re-invigorate community governance structures — many of which were destroyed during the years of conflict — to enable individual communities to take effective and responsible collective actions to address the security challenges they face. Historically, national security infrastructure has never reached every community in the country; for instance, it has never been the case that every town or village, or even district, had its own police office. Instead, individual communities were often required to take principal responsibility for security matters along with a host of other issues. Indeed, even during the conflicts, some communities maintained the tradition of developing community approaches to security in the absence of credible national institutions that were able to provide needed services. In Kabul, participants described a community policing approach where mosque-based *shuras*, comprised of representatives from the area, mediated local disputes about land or resources, and also appointed volunteers on every street to serve as informal security monitors. This supplemented a system in which monitors within each household maintained regular contact with each other through a system of regular calls along the length of the street.

The community-based initiative in Kabul is illustrative of approaches taken by many communities across the country and suggests that local organizations can be an important source of security and stability. Indeed, since it is unrealistic to assume that the resources of the national government will be able to provide security by deploying personnel to all parts of the country, participants believed that it was of utmost importance to help Afghan communities take collective action in addressing security issues in a sustainable way. Participants noted the long tradition of community governance through *shura* that existed in the country and believed that it was a tradition that held special promise for dealing with security issues. The tradition needs to be built upon to ensure that modern *shuras* are representative and inclusive of the whole community, and that the national government and international community provide appropriate support to ensure their success.

Ultimately, participants suggested that a security that was imposed — either from outside or from the center — would never be sustainable. Sustainable security must be bottom-up; it must be one that is based on communities with the capacity to make local decisions in concert with national institutions. When local communities are given the resources to have impact, they inevitably will identify the most pressing threats to security as high priorities to address. Physical security will doubtless be a priority, but communities are likely to identify other vulnerabilities that may be more pertinent to their local context.

At the **national** level, institutions and infrastructure — national army, police, and legal system — are important even if they do not have a constant physical presence in every community. First, they inspire confidence in the competence and governance capacity of the central administration in Kabul, which has an important psychological impact on the people in the rest of the country and contributes to security. Second, the relationship between community governance and national institutions is one of mutual partnership; both are essential to ensuring security. Communities must be able to rely on a set of national institutions that can be called upon in times of need to provide an overall framework for security. National institutions, for their part, will never be able to stabilize the entire country on their own, and thus will rely on communities to provide local models of security.

Of all the national institutions discussed, the need for a credible, neutral, and effective national police force was the most frequently mentioned. Participants complained that the current police contingents are highly fractionalized and untrustworthy, and, in fact, are part of the security problem. The presence of ISAF was seen as an opportunity to properly train and restructure the police force into a more effective and accountable body.

Finally, in order for security to be sustainable, intervention is also required at the **global** level, since the internal security of Afghanistan is not only affected by what happens in Afghanistan. Participants noted that the role of geopolitics in fueling conflict in Afghanistan over the course of its history is too significant to ignore. Neighboring countries must make a commitment to peace in Afghanistan, as must other global powers. Some participants expressed dismay at what appeared to be a chronic tendency on the part of other countries to use Afghanistan and its people as instruments to pursue their own interests, disregarding the suffering they cause. At root was an anxiety that national efforts, however well-conceived and carried out, would simply unravel if other countries continued to exploit rather than respect Afghanistan and its people. What is required is a new international regime of, at least, non-intervention, and, at best, regional cooperation to combat shared problems and to take advantage of opportunities for mutual security.

**International aid must be coordinated, accountable, and focused on local capacity.**

Although participants were generally supportive and appreciative of the level of international support for reconstruction, the current character of aid allocation and distribution raised a number of concerns.

*Coordination.* The vast increase in international activity in Afghanistan over the past several months has raised serious coordination questions of two types. First, participants expressed concern that various international actors themselves are not coordinated in their efforts. In the absence of an overall program articulated and communicated by the AIA to which all local and international actors

could conform, it appears that everyone is simply pursuing individual agendas. At the same time, international actors are not coordinating with local communities. NGOs are going ahead with aid distribution even where community representatives have not agreed on the identification of the most vulnerable beneficiaries. Second, while many participants acknowledged that provision of assistance could help build confidence, there was also a feeling that it could be the source of competition and therefore fuel potential conflict. Distribution, therefore, needs to be properly managed and coordinated with local communities.

A similar issue was raised about the role of ISAF in humanitarian aid and rehabilitation. Some participants felt that the presence of armed men of any nationality on school premises, for instance, undermines the efforts to convince children that power cannot be achieved through might. The sight of heavily-armed men working at schools either frightens or fascinates children, and in either case, complicates efforts to achieve a sense of normalcy. This disquiet about ISAF's extra-security roles is exacerbated by the fact that few were aware of the consultations being held by ISAF or of the drop-boxes available to provide feedback and comments to ISAF.

*Accountability.* Some participants complained that despite announcements of significant contributions to the people of Kabul, they had in fact seen very little of the influx of funds. Many questioned where and how the money is being spent, both by international actors and by the AIA, and some participants were clearly distrustful of the latter. International aid needs to be accountable not only to donors, but also to the Afghans themselves. Allegations that the AIA or the UN are using aid for political purposes, and thus favoring some people and regions over others, would do serious damage to the reconstruction process.

*Local capacity development.* The character of the rapid increase in international aid to Afghanistan has brought two parallel concerns about local capacity: first, that the international presence is weakening rather than strengthening the capacity of Afghanistan's own institutions and second, that international aid is focusing on national institutions rather than local ones.

Some participants said that the first danger – that of undermining local capacity – is already beginning to threaten Afghanistan. Already, local NGOs and the AIA are losing key staff to the UN and large international NGOs, which offer more attractive compensation. Some participants also suggested that the significant presence of international organizations and staff in Afghanistan may have the unfortunate consequence of allowing Afghans to evade responsibility for reconstruction, engendering a belief that reconstruction is an international task, rather than a project for the nation to undertake with international support. A related concern was that the international presence could also direct reconstruction funds outside the country through ex-patriot salaries and the purchase of goods imported from donor countries rather than supporting local labor and goods. Finally, the rapid expansion of international activity is also in danger of undermining the credibility of the AIA in the eyes of both Afghans and the international community and may stunt the development of the Interim Administration's own capacity to provide services to the country. For example, it was said that schools are being rehabilitated without any reference to the Ministry of Education.

Participants recognized that these are all dangers to be mitigated rather than likely eliminated since international support is such an essential element of the reconstruction process. Nevertheless, this

observation was coupled with an expression of anxiety over how long international support for Afghanistan would last, and what Afghanistan would do without strong institutions of its own.

The second concern expressed by the participants was that in the rush to build national institutions, international support and local NGO work would focus on the center at the expense of community development. Since building national institutions will likely be a more attractive international project — it is, after all, a more straightforward, more familiar, and more visible activity— the danger exists that national institutions will be funded without corresponding investments in the local community structures required to sustain peace.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The discussions and interviews yielded many recommendations for the entire set of actors currently operating in Afghanistan. These recommendations are compiled, as they were received from discussion participants, below:

### **Interim Administration**

- Develop and communicate a comprehensive development plan – that deals with security issues among other things – to allow various actors to coordinate their efforts by conforming to the plan
- Recognize the role of local *shuras* and formalize their involvement in governance and national decision making
- Rehabilitate Afghanistan’s cultural monuments, including tracing lost and smuggled artifacts
- Address, as a priority, issues of reconciliation between different groups and individuals within the country
- Work to stop arms smuggling
- Create mechanisms to improve the accountability of the use of aid funds
- Recognize, give legitimacy to, and involve civil society groups as actors in policy-making on reconstruction
- Create a program of peace education at all levels – in the schools, mass media, and community organizations – including revising school curricula
- Be rigorous about implementing the revised Constitution
- Create structures for local service providers (aid, development, health, education, etc.) to be able to replace international organizations over time
- Demonstrate to neighbors that peace in Afghanistan is in the interests of the entire region
- Facilitate mass participation in reconstruction through associations of farmers, students, teachers, etc., as well as through community forums, local NGOs, etc.
- Create a campaign of public information about the steps foreseen in the formation of the Loya Jirga, and how people might participate, to help build confidence in the political transition

## **United Nations**

- Honor the principles espoused in activities — e.g. respecting and strengthening local capacities, coordinating activities, etc.
- Sponsor a parallel accord to Bonn with neighboring countries and other powers as a vehicle for an explicit international commitment to non-interference and support for peace in Afghanistan
- Facilitate constitutional changes in Afghanistan and monitor implementation
- Support the development of a national army, police, and legal system
- Consider the establishment of an independent, expert “think tank” to make recommendations on reconstruction policy to various actors
- Ensure accountability in the use of international funds – should be accountable to Afghan people, not only to donor governments
- Adapt reconstruction policy and approach to current context; the “Strategic Framework” was developed for a very different environment and must be updated
- UN should not implement, but rather should strengthen local capacity for implementation through local NGOs and the AIA
- Consider engaging with community structures for the resolution of security problems facing urban families, pending the restructuring and training of the police
- Expand and extend ISAF temporarily through the end of the transition period and geographically to other major cities
- Reconsider the deployment of ISAF or other armed international groups to rehabilitation work in order to reduce the potential for confusion about their role and for undermining local peace efforts
- Expand ISAF’s efforts at systematically engaging community leaders in the areas where ISAF operates
- Do not delay reconstruction activity while waiting for the security situation to improve
- Be careful about undermining the local capacity of
  - AIA
  - Local NGOs
  - Local communities
- Develop an explicit plan for handing over responsibilities to local actors
- Create a mutual partnership with local NGOs and the AIA
- Ensure that Afghans themselves are given the principal role in the reconstruction effort
- Remain impartial in the aid process so as not to be seen as a tool for US interests

## **Loya Jirga**

- Ensure fair representation by the population in the Loya Jirga process
  - Consider appointing members to ensure true representation of all interests; a condition which would be difficult to reach if 100% of the representatives are elected.
  - Strengthen election processes, including developing criteria for candidates and providing for observers and monitors
- Consider extending the two-year Transitional Administration mandate to 3-5 years to ensure that appropriate foundations are in place for elections

## **NGOs**

- Adjust programs according to AIA priorities
- Be careful to supplement rather than supplant AIA
- Create a sense of partnership with AIA, UN, and donor governments
- Communicate clearly to correct perceptions about lack of transparency and accountability — communicate especially with the AIA in order to build trust
- Local NGOs: Focus work on “social reconstruction/recovery” including community development, empowerment, peace education, etc. (and leave physical reconstruction to large international NGOs, UN, and other multilateral actors)
- Local NGOs: Provide training and orientation for those in the Afghan Diaspora wishing to return to Afghanistan, to strengthen relations between Diaspora and local Afghans
- Design programming so as to include peace-building education in communities
- Use aid strategically to provide incentives for peace-building
- Work in ways to strengthen local capacity for dispute resolution and decision making
- Coordinate efforts among various NGO's, UN, and AIA doing community organizing to ensure that community structures do not proliferate in counter-productive ways
- Encourage and support serious study and evaluation of alternative community development models and make recommendations

## **Diaspora**

- Work with others in Afghanistan – do not “go it alone”
- Be ready to learn from those in the country; do not assume superior knowledge, expertise, or perspectives
- Stop fueling ethnic division and strife in the community abroad; it has negative effects in the country
- Understand the social, cultural, and economic situation of Afghanistan and do not impose Western lifestyle and cultures on Afghanistan

## **Other Countries**

- Stop the smuggle of arms through Afghanistan
- Recognize and respect the rights and humanity of the Afghan people rather than using them as instruments for the achievement of national interests
- Play an active and supportive role in rebuilding Afghanistan
- Establish regional cooperation associations, especially on economic and security issues
- Establish a mandate for other countries to remain in Afghanistan “to finish the job”



## ANNEX

### List of participants in the Peshawar roundtable discussion

Fahim Hakim	- Program Coordinator, Cooperation for Peace and Unity (CPAU)
Hamidullah Natiq	- Consultant, CPAU
Said Ahmad Mehran	- Trainer, Norwegian Project Office/Rural Rehabilitation Association for Afghanistan (NPO/RRAA)
Dr. Seddiq Weera	- Program Director, Center for Peace Studies
Aziz Rafiee	- Managing Director, Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR)
A. Razique Samadi	- Managing Director, Afghan Development Association (ADA)
Mohammed Ehsan	- Program Manager, Norwegian Church Aid (NCA)
Fazel-Rabi Haqbeen	- Managing Director, Afghan Inkishaaf Tarbiawee Markaz (AITM)
Tahmina Mehrqan	- Member, CPAU
Afifu Azim	- Coordinator, Afghan Women's Network (AWN)
Jamila Afghani	- Director, NEN
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Muhammad Suleman	- Program Manager, CPAU
Marzia Meena	- Office Manager, CBSC
Mirwais Nahzat	- Program Development Manager, Sanayee Development Foundation (SDF) (Former SIEAL)
Mirwais Wardak	- Program Officer, CPAU