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AFGHANISTAN: Interview with regional analyst and writer Ahmed Rashid Ahmed Rashid is a prominent Pakistani writer on Afghan and Central Asian affairs. Respected in the region, he shot to prominence after 11 September when his book on the Taliban became required reading worldwide.

He told IRIN in the Pakistani capital Islamabad on Friday he wanted to see a lean Afghan government and small bureaucracy emerging that would not consume vast amounts of aid. Rashid also called for a central trust fund to administer aid money, so that low profile, but essential projects would get the resources needed.

He also spoke about the need to widen reconstruction, emphasising that many of Afghanistan's problems are common to the region.

Q: What is the importance of the Tokyo conference for Afghanistan?

A: Tokyo has been a major development. It has set off a new era for Afghanistan, South Asia and Central Asia. There has been enormous commitment shown by the international community. The pledges of funding, for at least, the next two years have been very large. My one concern about the Tokyo agreement is that there is no mechanism agreed upon as to how this aid would be distributed.

There was hope that the aid from donor countries could go into a central trust fund, which would be managed by the UN, the World Bank and perhaps some of the major donor countries. There has been no agreement on this and the problem is that most countries have expressed a desire to have bilateral aid with the new Afghan government.

The problem here is that there will be a reluctance from the donors to support some of the non-attractive needs of the Afghan government such as budgetary support, paying salaries, building the new army, paying salaries for the new army and its training. All these are very vital institutions, which will help in the integration of Afghanistan and bring peace and stability.

As yet, we have not seen that kind of funding for essential needs because clearly the new government is going to be dependent on foreign funds for its budget for at least the next two years before it can start to generate its own income. There also has to be some kind of budgetary support.

Q: What's your assessment of efforts to encourage Afghans living abroad to return to their country?

A: There has been some major effort by the International Organisation for Migration [IOM] to bring back professional Afghans to join the new government, to join the UN agencies but again the donor countries have not set up any kind of system to bring them back.

It would be very helpful if the USAID, the German aid and the Scandinavian aid programmes were to hire Afghans living in their countries who were professionals who would come back and manage some of these programmes. I think this is something that was not adequately discussed in Tokyo and action has not been adequately taken to bring back the diaspora, the professional Afghans who can help not only run the country but run developmental programmes.

Q: Over the past decade there are several examples of post-conflict reconstruction with mixed results. How should the UN and International community go about the rebuilding of Afghanistan?

A: There are several important issues, the first is obviously that you don't want thousands of foreigners belonging to UN agencies and NGOs running around Afghanistan. Much of this work should be taken by professional Afghans who would want to come back from around the world even if for six or nine months. Donor countries should make arrangements for these Afghans to come back and "Afghanise" the development and reconstruction.

The second major issue, which we see in UN efforts in Cambodia and East Timor is that you clearly need a minimal government in Afghanistan. You do not want a huge bureaucracy. You do not need multiple ministries. The Afghan state for the coming 10 to 15 years is not going to have the revenues to sustain a large state structure.

The international community has to approach this and convince the Afghan government and the Afghan warlords that what they need is a small army, a small bureaucracy and there should be maximum private initiatives. There should be as few restrictions as possible for the private sector.

Banking and trade and all these issues should be completely freed up of any restrictions and the private sector has to be encouraged so that a large state structure is not created. Already there are 270,000 Afghan civil servants who haven't been paid for the last six months.

In the future many of these Afghan civil servants are not ready to cope with the new realities, they are not trained and they are not educated. The new Afghan government should be laying off many of these civil servants and creating a core group who will not overburden state structures.

Q: What are the regional implications of Afghan reconstruction?

A: The regional implications are enormous, the aid programmes should be geared to the whole region. Again this was not addressed in Tokyo. There is a region of instability, which is largely due to economic deprivation. This region includes the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Baluchistan bordering Afghanistan in Pakistan and the Ferghana Valley in Central Asia and Seistan in Iran.

In the long term the aid agencies should be looking at including these deprived and unstable areas in the development programme in Afghanistan. Smaller but similar development programmes should also be running in these areas too.

There should be a maximum use of skills from these areas to help the Afghan reconstruction. There should be a use of labourers, of contractors from these areas so there is much greater flow of people and their prosperity should be brought to fringe border regions, which are also a source of instability for Afghanistan.

Also in the long term you need to look at a programme of regional reconstruction, where you would involve the deprived regions around Afghanistan, which unfortunately over the last 10 - 15 years have been sources of manpower to militancy and fundamentalism and all these problems.

Q: How important is security for the whole process?

A: It's very important, very clearly. You are not going to get large aid programmes of the ground and I think its essential that some kind of international security force should be put into the five major Afghan cities as quickly as possible. This is the demand of the 99 percent of the Afghan people, neighbouring countries and NGOs.

Hamid Karzai had himself asked for it at the Tokyo conference. There may be some reluctance shown by some warlords about this, apparently Ismail Khan has objected to this.

The main block to this has been the Americans so far. The don't want a security force as long as the war continues and their forces are in Afghanistan. A security force in Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandahar, Herat and Mazar-e Sharif is going to add to stability, security, which will speed up the whole mopping up military operations that the Americans have.

Q: With huge aid coming in, do you fear a dependent Afghan state?

A: That's why you need a minimal government and the freedom of the private sector. The Afghan private sector is very creative, they can work and prosper in the most adverse circumstances, even though much of its been illegal activity such as the smuggling.

A lot of these programmes should be income generating. The help to agriculture will obviously provide food security to the people but there has to be a lot of investment in the cash crops, which would allow new exports.

There has to be investment in cottage industry and in handicrafts. The aid has not to be of a nature where dependency increases. It has to be income generating both for the state and for the people. Its very important that agencies start looking at this problem immediately to prevent the client syndrome that we have seen in the past.

Q: Do you see any lack of coordination among the aid agencies?

A: There is a lot of competition among the aid agencies for the funds. There has to be an international watchdog committee to make sure that this does not become a fight between the agencies for the money. To monitor the activities, to see that there is no duplication, to see that the aid effort is coordinated.

The crucial element of this trust fund, if it's ever set up, would be a political tool in the hands of the interim government. Aid would go to those who cooperate with the Afghan government. The international community has to see that aid helps the healing and reconciliation process in Afghanistan.

There has to be enormous expectations from the government by the Afghan people and the international community has to implement some very quick action projects to meet people's expectations. This will stabilise the interim government and extend its writ all over the country.

Q: What challenges do you see to the political process initiated with the Bonn agreement?

A: I think the political process is moving along quite well. Once a Loya Jirga [grand council] commission is set up, it will move around the country to meet people and to encourage them to choose their representatives for the Loya Jirga. At the end of March the king [Muhammad Zahir Shah] will arrive and the political activity will intensify by June.

The political process as it builds up has to be matched by adequate measures taken by the international community for reconstruction and development. The political plan can only prosper when there is matching economic development.

Q: What is your overall prognosis for Afghanistan?

A: I am very optimistic, but the situation remains tense. The war is continuing as the coalition mop up the Al-Qaeda and the Taliban and these are going to create problems. There are problems with the warlords. But I think once the political process starts and the development process starts, its really going to usher in a new era.