

International Affairs Forum Interview

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By Jason Miks

IA-Forum talks with the Afghan Ambassador to Japan, HE **Haron Amin**. Mr. Amin has previously been the acting ambassador at the Embassy of Afghanistan in Washington, D.C. and served for several years as the representative of Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud and the Northern Alliance to the United States.



International Affairs Forum:

Following the Bonn Accord in December 2001, which provided for an interim administration in Afghanistan, Japan hosted the first Donors' Conference for the country's reconstruction. What support has Japan been able to give to these efforts?

Ambassador Haron Amin: Without Japan or the Tokyo conference the significance of Bonn would not have been as great. What gave teeth to the Bonn process was the fact that Japan was not only the first country to host this conference, but that it set the tone for the international community's pledges. Also, because it delivered more than initially pledged it dispersed the funding at a very appropriate time – in fact before the deadline. The significance has been that Japan has provided more than a billion dollars in the context of assistance. Between January 2002 and January 2005 Japan provided a total of \$683 million worth of

assistance. Of this, \$108 million was spent on the political process and \$119 million was spent on improving security. An additional \$456 million dollars were spent on infrastructure such as improving roads, agriculture and so forth. Between January of last year and January this year a total of close to \$180 million dollars had been spent on the same sectors.

As you can see Japan has played a very significant role and will continue to. Given that in the post 9-11 world its foreign policy has taken on a new dimension and despite the fact that it is going through a transitional stage and developing a new foreign policy dogma, Japan has distinguished itself as a country that has contributed significantly to the ongoing development of an emerging democracy.

IA-Forum: How do you view relations between Afghanistan and Japan, and what opportunities do you see for this relationship in the next 5 years?

Ambassador Amin: I think that before I discuss the future it is important to consider the relations that have existed between Japan and Afghanistan in the past. There are historical impacts that the two countries have had on each other. For example as you know Buddhism has travelled towards the east and has made it to Japan. Therefore in the context of religion, trade or etiquette - whatever - there has definitely been an impact on the Japanese. And in return Japan, through the age of modernisation, has impacted the entire globe including particularly with those countries seeking to modernise. Having said that, the most significant issue for Afghans is the idea that if the Japanese were able to develop in the post World War II period so quickly, then so can the Afghans. This, psychologically, is having an enormous impact on the Afghans.

Afghanistan is the best example of the co-operation and dialogue between different civilisations. Japan has a unique role as a country able to bridge the gap between different civilisations. May I also say that Japan's lifestyle is heavily dependent on raw materials – in our part of the world there are an abundance of them. I think that the genius of the Japanese is that they have managed to effectively manipulate raw materials – the raw materials which our region can provide for them, and they will be able to continue their lifestyle. That of course will help promote trade between Japan and Afghanistan. Afghanistan has the second highest iron reserves, the third highest

copper reserves and also has natural gas and oil and also other minerals and semi-precious stones. The future I see is not just further pledges of support for the development of Afghanistan but regional trade and cooperation. The dynamics are not just about assistance and we hope to further consolidate this.

IA-Forum: How significant is it for Afghanistan to become the newest member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)?

Ambassador Amin: As you know the significant of this forum is of paramount importance. This forum represents a population of about 1.5 billion people. In this there is a middle class of about 250 million people which could grow rapidly in the next decade. This region is a thirsty region - for energy and raw materials. Afghanistan, being the land bridging or land linking country constitutes a significant transit route to these countries. Afghanistan can bring oil to SAARC countries. And we're not even talking about the fact that China is the other major economy. SAARC provides Afghanistan an opportunity and Afghanistan offers SAARC an opportunity. I hope we will be able to capitalise on the experience of SAARC member countries. One thing that makes this co-operation easier is that Afghanistan was not colonised and therefore maintains many cultural affinities with these people which itself makes co-operation more forthcoming.

IA-Forum: How important do you think last year's Parliamentary elections were, and how confident are you that such a diverse range of people will be able to work together for the common good?

Ambassador Amin: The Parliamentary elections were of significance because they were the last chapter of the Bonn Accord. As you know the political road map which served as a 'beginners constitution' for Afghanistan was laid in Bonn. It was a second act of defiance against the threats posed by the Taliban and Al Qaeda. It was a time that made the people of Afghanistan proud because they were able to elect their own representatives in an act that devolved power from a central authority to locally elected officials. It also showed that Afghanistan would move towards checks and balances and gave hope that there would not be a monopoly of power by the central government.

The most important thing is that whilst there is this impression that Afghanistan is this enormously perfidious society, I would pose a counter argument that for the last 5,000 years or more Afghans have existed – whatever their country may have been called. The inhabitants of this diverse land have termed themselves inhabitants of this place first and then something else. For example Pakistani-British – they see themselves first as British before they see themselves as something else. In the US they have people from all over the world, but they see themselves as American first. This

is very important for Afghans. Afghans feel proud. Afghanistan derives a great deal of its strength from its diversity. Nobody has talked as far as I know about secession. I think we can say that with these elections Afghanistan took the final test on the road to democracy. We are still a developing democracy, but we took the step with valour and courage. We committed ourselves to the process and would like to see the finalisation of that process.

IA-Forum: In many respects women were treated particularly badly by the Taliban. What has the government been able to do to improve this and what does it hope to achieve in the future?

Ambassador Amin: The best example of equality between men and women was the launching in the post Taliban period of schools across Afghanistan. Right now we have more than 6 million students and 40 per cent are girls and women. The government also immediately restored their rights to go back to any kind of work day. Afghanistan has a history of tolerance towards women. Women's rights are guaranteed in the constitution, we have four female ministers in the cabinet, a female governor and today 28 per cent of parliamentarians are women which I would say is probably the highest in the world. As you know, nobody compelled these women to be elected. They made their own choices and were courageous enough to go out and earn those votes. Progress within any kind of scheme requires inclusiveness and Afghanistan

cannot afford to overlook 50 per cent of its population. That is why we have passed very enlightened and progressive laws and we underscore the fact that we strongly believe we must integrate women and we hope that we can continue to take into account the expectations of this more than 50 per cent of the population.

IA-Forum: While Helmand province recorded a 10% decline in opium cultivation in 2005, neighbouring Nimroz saw a dramatic increase. How much of a problem is this, and what can the international community do to help?

Ambassador Amin: For the last one month or so President Karzai has considered narcotics to be a greater menace than terrorism. More than 90 per cent of Afghanistan remains fairly secure but the fact is that the problem in Afghanistan, if not constrained, would pose a challenge to international stability if the issue of narcotics is not scrutinized and looked after. Let me say the international community should look at Afghanistan's narcotics problem not only from a supply end but also demand end. We are together with the international community in saying yes, Afghanistan produces over 80 per cent of the world's opium. But we also believe that if there is also advocacy on the issue of suppression, we need to address the issue of alternative livelihoods and crop diversification.

We strongly believe that for the international community and

Afghanistan to find solutions there needs to be an enormous amount of discussion, including dialogue with local farmers. If we take the enforcement mechanism. Afghanistan's informal economy is a third of its GDP - that is what narcotics brings. We need strong anti-corruption laws and we need to have the work of everyone including the European community to look at the demand side. Two decades ago we had the Golden Triangle. Today we have Afghanistan. Given the demand, we are going to have a third country, so we are not curing the disease. We are basically injecting morphine, we are injecting painkillers into the problem but instead need to cure it. This is a modest request, the middleman who makes the money will always be there to prosper if there is disconnect between the supplier and these making demands.

IA-Forum: The Kunar province has been described by one US soldier as 'enemy central'. Is the government concerned about the persistence of Taliban resistance in some parts of the country, and what can be done to address the problem?

Ambassador Amin: In order to reach the point where we can refer to 'enemy central' we need to understand what went wrong. We need to understand why there is a re-emergence of the Taliban. 'One mistake I think is that intelligence by quarreling tribes was used to quell the enmity of one group against the other. This was one reason. Another reason was that many of the

translators hired from overseas came with some sort of ethnic baggage and they tried to take advantage. There was also a reaction, where people weren't necessarily acting out of need, but there was a reaction. There was not enough knowledge about Afghan codes of honour and not paying enough attention to the history of how Afghans responded to the British and the Soviets amongst others. I think these are some of the causes. We need to look at these causes so that we don't draw the wrong conclusion.

A second matter is how can the Taliban cross the border, attack and then go back to their hiding spots. Who is supplying and financing them? Who is serving as the leadership? Thirdly, as long as there is under development of Afghanistan and under employment and lack of enforcement mechanism against corruption there will be some instability. Much more needs to be done in the context of collaboration of information, so that everyone is on the same page and so Afghanistan can adopt the right path and we can overcome the security impasse in one or two provinces.

IA-Forum: What do you think will be the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan over the next 12 months?

Ambassador Amin: I think twelve months is a short period of time. But I would say even for the next five years I can tell you that the biggest challenge is going to be narcotics. The second biggest challenge is going to be human resource capital. The third is going to be revenue generation. Why do I say these things? We have raw materials and a comparative advantage in the transit route which it can provide for the region and for 3 billion people's economies. The transit route is an opportunity. Narcotics are a menace. In order to utilise our resources we need human resource capital, we need to generate revenues. If Afghanistan cannot sustain its own costs it will be very difficult to gather the international community together and say that you need to finance our own officials as well as everything else. We need to become self sufficient so we can take on the work of the continuing development of Afghanistan.

IA-Forum: Thank you for this interview, Ambassador.

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