

AFGHANISTAN

By a Special Contributor

Afghanistan has suffered steady destruction since 1979 when forces of the former Soviet Union moved in. The US conducted a proxy war through the CIA and Pakistan, arming tribal guerrillas to do the fighting against the Russians. The two-decade old civil war turned Afghanistan into one of the world's bloodiest battlefields. When the Soviets left, the US followed suit leaving Afghanistan to fend for itself with warlords and fundamentalist zealots. The Taliban are the offspring of this legacy, left with little but a ravaged, starving nation and plentiful supply of arms. The Taliban isolated the country from the rest of the world and actively supported poppy cultivation, and by 2000 Afghanistan was producing some 3,200 t of opium or 75% of the world's output.

Its land-locked geography, rugged mountainous terrain, and highly fragmented and murderously faction-ridden social structure, have prevented economic development in Afghanistan. The only metallurgical industry, a copper mining-cum-smelter facility at Ainak, south of Kabul, was set up by the Soviets during their occupation. The mine was rated to produce 150,000 t/y of copper ore but production suffered due to infrastructural shortages and political instability. The ore reserves, according to Soviet geologists, were of the order of 360 Mt with 0.7 to 1.5% Cu.

An important resource is coal, proved deposits of high-grade coal being estimated

at 100 Mt and probable reserves at 400 Mt. Coal occurs mostly in the north from Herat to Badakshan. Coal is mined at Karkar in Pul-e-Khumri, Ishpushta near Doshi (north of Kabul) and Dar-e-Suf, south of Mazar-e-Sharif. Coal production used to be around 180,000 t/y and there was a proposal to raise it to 300,000 t/y. Czech aid in the form of mining equipment was available in the past to extract coal in the hard rocky mines in the north. Czech aid has also been forthcoming for setting up a cement plant with a capacity of 115,000 t/y.

The Hajigak hills, in Bamyan province, have rich reserves of iron ore amounting to 1,700 Mt. High-grade chrome ore occurs in the Logar valley, near Herat. Khwaja Rawash mountain has deposits of uranium and ore was previously exported to the former Soviet Union. Beryllium occurs in the Kunar valley.

Natural gas occurs in abundance and it was an important export commodity supplied by pipeline to Uzbekistan. Gas production was around 2.4 billion m³, most of it sourced from Shiberghan and Sar-i-Pol in the north. The total gas reserves were estimated at 2,400 m³ and efforts were made to add 1,000 billion m³ to the exploitable reserves. Natural gas is used as feedstock for producing fertiliser at Mazar-e-Sharif and the bulk of the high-grade urea was sent to Uzbekistan. Natural gas is also used to operate a 34 MW power plant at Mazar.