

AFGHANISTAN

By a Special Contributor

President Hamid Karzai has been reduced to a mere figurehead, with no independent base, and US support was the sole source of his power during 2002. Barring a token allegiance to him, the major warlords operated on their own. In resource-rich Herat Province, Governor Ismail Khan's demeanour was almost presidential. The irascible Dostum who controls the Balkh region was a law unto himself, flying his own flag and flaunting his own currency. In the high mountains of the Badakshan region, Burhanuddin Rabbani's writ ran. In the verdant Panjshir valley, Ahmed Shah Masood's forces were in control.

The official currency, the afghani, was so devalued that people had to carry sackfuls of notes to buy petty items. Estimates are that some 14 trillion afghanis were in circulation and efforts were under way to introduce a new afghani which will be exchanged for 40,000 old afghanis or about US\$1.00. The list of needs is staggering. Although the coalition against terrorism headed by the US had committed US\$4.5 billion, the amount delivered till August 2002 was only US\$850 million.

During February 2003, President Karzai made a trip to Washington with a long list of needs and, in addition to more US pledges to help Afghanistan, the IMF announced that grants from the UK, Italy, Japan, Norway, Sweden and from the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund would allow Kabul to clear US\$11.1 million in arrears. The World Bank promised to consider a new US\$108 million loan in March-April to rebuild a road between Kabul and the Tajikistan border. Years of drought and fighting have seen Afghanistan's agricultural production plunge below subsistence levels.

For its size, the country has large coal reserves, proven deposits of high-grade coal being placed at 100 Mt and probable reserves estimated at 400 Mt. The deposits are mostly concentrated in the region between Herat and Badakshan in the north. Coal is mined at Karkar in the Pule-e-Khumri region, at Ishpushta near Doshi to the north of Kabul and at Dar-e-Suf to the south of Mazar. Coal output used to be around 180,000 t/y and there were efforts to raise this to 300,000 t/y. Czechoslovakia used to supply the mining equipment needed to extract coal in the hard-coal mines in the north. There was also Czech assistance to set up a cement plant with a capacity of 115,000 t/y.

The only metal industry, a copper mining-cum-smelter plant established with Soviet assistance at Ainak, south of Kabul, suffered badly because of US bombing. It had a mining capacity of 150,000 t/y of copper ore. Soviet geologists had estimated the reserves in the neighbourhood at 360 Mt averaging 0.7% to 1.5% Cu. What little production there was prior to the attack on Kabul was left unutilised.

An important source of foreign exchange is natural gas, which is supplied by pipeline to Uzbekistan. The output of natural gas used to be in the region of 2,400 m³/d, most of it obtained from Shiberghan and Sar-i-Pol in the north, which has a large reservoir of gas. Total reserves were estimated at 2,000 billion m³ some years ago and there was a proposal to try to add 1,000 billion m³ to the exploitable resource. Natural gas is utilised as feedstock for the fertiliser plant at Mazar-e-Sharif, and high-grade urea was exported to Uzbekistan. This town was a stronghold of the now vanquished Taliban, and heavy US bombing has left its facilities crippled. Natural gas was also used for running a 34 MW generator at Mazar-e-Sharif for producing electricity.

The Hajigak Hills, about 160 km west of Kabul in Bamyan Province, are a repository of high-grade iron ore, estimated at 1,700 Mt. Bamyan was the scene of incredible vandalism during the Taliban regime when centuries old, rare Buddha statues were razed to the ground.

There are also deposits of high-grade chrome ore in the Logar valley, near Herat. Uranium mined in the Khwaja Rawash Mountains to the east of Kabul used to be exported to the Central Asian countries. The Kunar Valley has beryllium deposits. Other significant occurrences are gold and silver in the Panjshir Valley, lapis lazuli in Badakshan, and asbestos, sulphur and mica in the vicinity of Maimana. Soviet geologists had mapped out finds of uranium, beryl, barite, lead, zinc, fluorspar, bauxite, lithium, tantalum and emerald.