



A man rides his
bicycle in Kabul.

Kabul

Signs of progress reward long days

*/// By Anne Benjaminson, John Groch
and Vin Traverso*





There is no shortage of information

about what is happening in Kabul and Afghanistan. Almost nine years after 9/11, the terrorist attacks are still being chronicled in the media and an ever-expanding body of literature. Keeping up with the ongoing story is almost impossible.

Likewise, attempting to describe this crucial moment in Afghanistan is like trying to paint the rapids of a river in a single stroke—it just can't be done. But there's an old saying in Dari: "Drop by drop, a river is formed." So it is, too, that the U.S. Mission in Afghanistan advances and its story is told—drop by drop, day by day.

Typical Day

As the morning sun crests over the snow-capped, smog-ringed peaks surrounding Kabul, a midlevel press officer walks across the embassy compound, navigating rows of housing trailers, to the public affairs section. She's up earlier than usual—though not by much—because another congressional delegation is in town, and its members need press clips at 6 a.m. before winging south to Kandahar with the Afghan press. It's the third CODEL the mission has hosted this month. They average one a week, down from the 2009 level but still enough to be a constant feature of embassy life.

Once she drops off the clips, the press officer walks back across the compound, dodging several dusty stray cats, for a quick breakfast at the embassy dining facility. The fresh pineapple and melon seem the more sensible choice, but the sausage and biscuits are tempting, especially since later today she might be able to hit one of the compound's three gyms and spend some time on the elliptical trainer.

By 8:30 a.m., the embassy's day is in full swing. An officer climbs into an armored vehicle to visit a clinic for child drug addicts that's funded by the Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. More than one million Afghans are drug abusers, an overlooked fact in a country that supplies nearly all the world's opium. Because of a lack of medicine and few child care options, mothers blow opium smoke in children's faces to calm them or ease their pain. The children at the clinic are now drug-free and have rediscovered their lively, boisterous selves.

Morning out in the provinces finds 26 Provincial Reconstruction Teams and 32 District Support Teams gearing up. Staffed by Department of State officers, U.S. Agency for International Development specialists, U.S. Department of Agriculture advisors and a variety of other agency representatives, the PRTs are far-flung outposts of U.S. defense, diplomacy and development initiatives.



Clockwise from above: Department of State officer Marlin Hardinger briefs the governor of Helmand and other officials in the town of Marjah; Foreground from left, embassy staffers Kelly Carrillo, Caitlin Hayden and Karen Smith enjoy a Buzkashi match in the outskirts of Kabul as two teams of horsemen battle to control a goat's carcass; Anne Benjaminson, left, and Caitlin Hayden relax in one of the embassy apartments.



Schoolhouse Project

This morning, a PRT civilian representative rises from his cot, throws on his flak jacket and hops into a combat vehicle to head to an isolated village to check on the progress of a USAID-funded schoolhouse, the village's first ever. Local Afghans provided the subsidized brick and mortar and their labor—the raw materials with which the U.S. government hopes to improve Afghanistan's appalling 30 percent literacy rate. After stripping off his military gear to look more like the civilian development expert he is, the PRT rep has tea with school officials, supplies additional USAID funding and even lends a hand with the work.

Back in Kabul, the press section is jumping by midmorning: With one officer traveling with the CODEL and another sitting in as the *New York Times* interviews the political counselor on Taliban reconciliation, the assistant information officer must oversee the ambassador's appearance at the opening of an anticorruption workshop. The embassy's rule of law, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Drug Enforcement Agency, Treasury and consular offices have been focusing for months with their Afghan counterparts on the consequences of corruption. The front office has decided to use this occasion to get its own message out, and the AIO and his expert Afghan staff must try to ensure that the

local media distinguishes U.S. support for Afghan government offices from U.S. disdain for the corrupt officials who may occupy them. It's a delicate balance. The news that evening focuses on U.S. support for good governance—a small victory.

As lunchtime nears, the officer heads to one of Kabul's restaurants to meet with Afghan businesspeople—and take advantage of a rare opportunity for an off-compound meal. Her contacts are some of the millions of Afghans who returned from exile in Pakistan after the American-led invasion in 2001 and have created new lives for themselves and employment for their countrymen. The officer asks about their reaction to August's election, in which President Hamid Karzai was elected to a second term. While concerned about corruption, the businesspeople are optimistic about their government's liberal regulatory policy and increased opportunities for trade with neighboring countries.

After his lunch in the schoolhouse with the village elders, the PRT civilian rep is off to meet with the development specialist and agriculture advisor who have been working to improve irrigation in a key district. Agriculture accounts for less than a third of Afghanistan's gross domestic product but occupies more than three-quarters of its labor force. Aside from the importance of weaning the country from its

At a "ramp ceremony" at Bagram Air Field, senior officials from the embassy and the International Security Assistance Forces pay their respects at the caskets of nine U.S. soldiers killed in Nuristan province.





People gather
at the famous
Blue Mosque in
Mazar-e Sharif.



Clockwise from left: Children color books at a Kabul drug-treatment facility; Afghan men attend a traditional shura; Poppy grows in the town of Marjah, in the restive Helmand Province.

poppy-based narco-economy, the development of smart, sustainable agriculture holds the promise of drawing in and pulling up the 36 percent of the population living in poverty.

Meeting the Generals

In the afternoon, an embassy officer walks to the International Security Assistance Forces headquarters located next to the embassy compound for the weekly meeting between ISAF Commander General Stanley McChrystal and Ambassador Karl Eikenberry. The room is packed with generals and high-ranking embassy officials, but many of the briefers are junior- and midlevel officers. The officer provides an update on the cabinet selection process. Other attendees raise items discussed in the embassy's 14 civil-military working groups, which coordinate a wide range of issues, from infrastructure projects to rule-of-law initiatives. After the briefing, the officer hurries to a digital videoconference with Washington colleagues on donor coordination. The United States is the single largest donor to Afghanistan, but other nations and multilateral agencies contribute hundreds of millions of dollars each year toward rebuilding infrastructure and enhancing human capacity.

At the end of the day, after producing a press release on the ambassador's visit and getting it out to media, up on the Web,

on Twitter and to the 2,000-plus fans on the embassy's Facebook page, the AIO skips the gym and heads straight to her apartment. Embassy apartments, available to senior-level officers, couples and some singles willing to share, have small but fully functional kitchens. It's there that she finds her husband, one of more than 30 Eligible Family Members working at the embassy. The compound's new grocery store had fresh green onions and chicken today, so a quick stir-fry is in order—especially since the embassy's resident blues-rock band, Danger Pay, is playing at The Duck and Cover and she doesn't want to miss it. It'll be a rare treat for those who would otherwise spend their evening entertained by the glow of their computer screens.

The end of the day in Afghanistan means another day is beginning. As some concerns are laid to rest, new hydra-headed challenges arise. It is hard but often satisfying work. Like the snowmelt streaming down the mountains, signs of progress are beginning to flow steadily through the countryside. The mission's work, too, continues in disparate streams drop by drop, day by day. ■

Anne Benjaminson, John Groch and Vin Traverso work in the economic, information and consular sections, respectively, at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul.

A landscaped plaza fronts the embassy's new chancery building.



At a Glance >>>

Afghanistan



Capital: Kabul

Government type: Islamic republic

Area: 652,230 sq. km.

Comparative area: Slightly smaller than Texas

Population: 28.4 million

Official languages: Dari (Afghan Farsi) and Pashto

GDP - per capita: \$800

Export commodities: Fruit, nuts, carpets, wool, cotton and hides

Export partners: India, Pakistan and United States

Import commodities: Food, petroleum products and textiles

Import partners: Pakistan, United States and Germany

Currency (code): Afghani (AFA)

Internet country code: .af

Source: Country Background Notes