

Overcoming the challenges

By HE HOMAYOUN TANDAR

AMBASSADOR OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF AFGHANISTAN TO THE COURT OF ST JAMES'S



HUMAYOUN TANDAR was educated at the Lycee Isteqlal in Kabul and graduated in Archaeology from La Sorbonne, Paris with a BA in 1980, obtaining a Masters degree in 1981. Between 1993-94 he specialised in International Relations at the International Institute for Public Administration in Paris following a decade as representative of Afghan Resistance in France. From 2002 he served as Ambassador in Belgium and of NATO affairs 2004-07. He was Deputy National Security Advisor in the office of the Nations Security Council in Kabul before being appointed Ambassador to the UK in 2009.

What are your ambitions and aims for the London Conference on Afghanistan?

We see the London Conference as an opportunity to set the future direction of our own efforts and that of the international community towards a co-ordinated political and development strategy. The main focus will be in strengthening governance, building greater security and promoting overall development in my country.

The issue of security is high on the agenda and the President will present a plan for the acceleration of the training of the Afghan Security Force and the eventual transfer of operations to this force. We hope that the international community will approve a force of 400,000, to include both security and police – we envisage a force of some 157,000 soldiers and 109,000 National Police by 2011 but we need the full support of our international partners to secure both training and the supply of equipment. We aim to take on security responsibility for key areas in Afghanistan within three years and for all of the country within five years. We also need to address the issue of how best to convert the Taliban fighters back to civilians. We ask the international community to take a supportive role in this regard and to help accelerate this strategy.

We expect the London Conference to address governance and development. This includes the strengthening of our civil institutions and promoting national reconciliation and unity of government including the development of the civil service. This will involve recruiting competent professionals to public service on the basis of merit, fighting corruption and upholding justice and the rule of law as well as promoting respect for human rights of all Afghans. The health and education of our people is also a priority and will form part of the discussions at the conference.

The conference will also focus on the important area of economic development. Our ambitions in this area include the development of our agricultural sector, water resource management – including irrigation and the provision of universal safe drinking water – transport infrastructure development (upgrading the rail, airport and road systems including maintaining the ring road), developing energy distribution and making further progress on the development of our mining and natural resources.

So we have wide ranging and achievable priorities and ambitions for the London Conference.

What do you believe to be the current major challenges facing Afghanistan apart from achieving the goals and priorities which you have outlined?

Clearly we have ambitious aims and we need the full support of the international community to help us achieve these targets. Aside from these the challenge, however, is overcoming a degree of international cynicism and scepticism. The world should applaud Afghanistan and its international partners for the very real achievements to date. All too often achievements are ignored by the media and the public.

The world should remember that in 2002 there was no institutional State of Afghanistan – today in 2010 we now have a State. In 2002 there was no security force – we now have one – there were no State institutions – we now have them. It is interesting to note that in 2001 there was no proper banking sector – we now have seventeen banks operating in Afghanistan and over four million Afghans now have bank accounts. This is a real demonstration of the confidence and commitment of the people of Afghanistan in the future of our country. As a result assets in the banking system have risen by some 20 per cent a year from 6 per cent of GDP in 2004-05 to over 20 per cent last year (2009). This vision of the future is a new phenomenon for the people of Afghanistan. And the international community should recognise and acknowledge the level of this achievement.

A further difficulty we face lies in the perception of Afghanistan by our international partners – each partner considers the zone in which they are operating to be *the* Afghanistan when, in fact, Afghanistan is a very diverse country. I am certain that with understanding these challenges can be overcome.

Is the Afghan government succeeding in the objective of building a more accountable, effective state capable of delivering legitimacy, services and economic opportunities?

I certainly believe this to be the case though progress is not uniform across all areas. Good governance is absolutely key and will be a vital topic at the London Conference. The Government is promoting transparent financial management at the central and provincial levels and we recognise that increased external assistance is somewhat dependent on improved Government accountability.

Achieving greater economic opportunities is linked closely with the development of Afghanistan as a transit region and corridor for trade. We have created a communication network of roads and railways to facilitate this role and we are endeavouring to reduce transit times, promote co-operative border management, including improved customs facilities and other multilateral and bilateral trade and transit agreements.

Plans are underway for the upgrade and development of Kabul International Airport and Herat Airport. Work is also in process at Mazar-i-Sharif, Jalalabad and Kandahar Airports. This activity will also confirm Afghanistan's potential as a transit route.

Our geographic location between Iran, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Pakistan should be viewed as an economic opportunity and we feel that Afghanistan can genuinely act as an economic bridge between nations. The international business community has started to recognise this potential and we have received successful inward investment from global companies such as Etisalat, Coca Cola and Standard Chartered Bank as well as the participation of leading Chinese, Turkish and Korean companies in major infrastructure projects such as building and construction in the road, rail and airport sectors, mining and water projects including dam construction.

What are the current trends in Afghanistan's economic performance? Per capita income has risen from US\$150 to US\$500 today. Are you seeing positive performances in other economic indicators?

The increase in per capita income is noteworthy and we are aiming to raise per capita income to US\$700 in two to three years. The agricultural sector has performed well and is more immune to the global economic downturn. The currency exchange rate has remained


stable and central financial reserves currently stand at US\$2 billion, representing one year's imports.

Inflation is falling and averaged around 9 per cent for 2009 and economic output has risen steadily from the 11 per cent recorded in 2007-08. We are making as good progress as we can, given both the security situation and the global economic environment.

In considering the security situation do you agree with David Miliband's comment that the real danger faced by Afghanistan is being outgoverned, rather than being outgunned?

I believe that the Foreign Secretary was referring to the expectation of the Afghan people for transparent and just government and this we are committed to providing. We are now in the process of building up the regional governmental structures – the government system is currently centralised. This issue involves the question of devolving power to the regions and the extent of regional autonomy. It is interesting that there have been some very successful initiatives promoted by the Governor in Helmand Province – an area supported by the British. An example in Helmand is a wheat distribution project which encourages farmers to switch away from opium poppies production (a source of Taleban financing) to wheat production. We want to replicate these successes in other parts of Afghanistan.

What is your vision for Afghanistan?

60 per cent of the Afghan population is under the age of 25. This generation is very talented and is more individualistic – they represent the foundation for building democracy, freedom and a better economic performance. The young of Afghanistan want a better social and economic life in the country. It is my vision that they will succeed in their hopes and aspirations. 

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