REPORT ON A TRIP TO KABUL
(October 15 - 21, 1993)

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Trip Objectives

- To sign Basic Country Agreement with the Government of the Islamic State of Afghanistan.
- To assertion the advisability and feasibility of establishing a representational and operational presence in Kabul.
- To attend the ACBAR Logar Coordination meeting at the CARE regional office in Puli Alam, Logar.
- To meet with Kabul based UN staff.

General Observations

Kabul was generally peaceful, vibrant and bustling even though there was no electricity or running water in all of the city during our visit. Due to closure of the main overland route from Pakistan and associated security concerns we flew from Peshawar to Kabul on the weekly Ariana (Afghanistan national airline) flight on October 15th, returning to Peshawar on the same plane the following week.

With winter fast approaching, major problems will be faced by the people of Kabul if the current state of affairs continues. Prices of basic food stuffs and fuel have already skyrocketed.

Security in most parts of Kabul was good. Uniformed government security personnel have been positioned at the entrance of most government ministries. Full body searches of visitors, previously a common practice, appear to be a thing of the past.

Government check posts at most major intersections are still manned by armed soldiers. The primary purpose of these check posts is to enforce the disarming of private individuals. Only a very few weapons were seen in the city. This is in stark contrast to rural areas where many people still carry AK-47s.

The presence of hundreds of armed soldiers at innumerable check post throughout the city notwithstanding, the CARE vehicle was stopped only once. This was a legitimate check for weapons as we returned from visiting project sites outside the city and was most likely due to the fact that the back of our pickup truck was covered with a tarp.

Early morning and late afternoon walks were part of our daily routine. This afforded us the opportunity to discern the pulse and tempo of the city and its people. Life is indeed harsh for the vast majority of Kabul residence. People are eagerly rebuilding. Shops are reopening, minority groups, long the main stay of the Kabul business scene, have started to return.

1 The most prominent minority group is the Sikh community, referred to locally as Hindus. Several Sikh families were seen returning to Kabul on the flight from Peshawar.
Due to extensive destruction in the western and southern sectors of Kabul city, and the continued threat of renewed attacks, hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to relocate to more secure areas. This has caused considerable over crowding and overloading of already hard pressed services and facilities. Human waste and refuse removal is a serious problem in many areas as witnessed during our extensive walks.

Much of the city's drainage system is inoperable due to war related damage and neglect. The supply of potable water is also a problem particularly for people living in apartments, tenements and low and middle income areas. Public hand pumps are the primary source of drinking water for the majority of Kabul residence. Many hand pumps are in need of repair or replacement. Government buildings, private homes, apartments, shops, etc. which have not been damaged to some extent are hard to find. Most buildings have had their windows broken, some have been repaired with plastic sheeting and cardboard while most have simply been left open. Window glass is hard to come by.

Public and private transport appears surprisingly plentiful. Busses are overcrowded to be sure and long waits at bus stops are common. Private taxis were found everywhere except the airport. Taxi fares were nearly the same as Peshawar.

Government offices conduct business only in the morning. Some employees were seen to be doing private business elsewhere in the city in the afternoon. Government salaries are said to be only enough to cover the cost of transport to and from work.

Kabul markets were full of all kinds of consumer goods. Prices were equal to or less than Peshawar prices. Road side eateries were plentiful and the food both delicious and cheap.

The Continental Hotel was the only international class hotel found still operating. It has been badly damaged by rockets. Only a dozen or so rooms are available. A single room costs one hundred and six dollars.

Banking remains a problem. Confidence levels are extremely low. As a result, most people favor private money changers and unofficial/traditional currency handling and transfer mechanisms. It is of interest to note that the first private bank was commissioned and opened for business during our visit to Kabul.

Accommodation for residencies and offices are plentiful. Three bed room houses with basement and small garden are being quoted at $300 to $400 a month depending on the area. Rents are payable in both Afghans and dollars. Due to wide spread speculation that the Afghani may strengthen against the dollar, considerable discounts are said to be available if payment is made in Afghans. Terms of payment are flexible. Monthly, quarterly, six monthly or yearly advance payments may be negotiated.

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2Population estimates for Kabul vary between 2 and 2.5 million. While these estimates indicate that between 1/2 and 1 million fewer people now live in Kabul as compared to prewar, the habitable area of the city has also been greatly reduced.