

AFGHANISTAN

By a Special Contributor

With an economy laid waste by war and completely land-locked, Afghanistan has attracted international attention. With US\$10 billion pledged for its development, there will be considerable activity in building up a viable infrastructure. Immediate priorities are rebuilding Afghanistan's shattered economy. The World Bank, UN Development Programme and the Asian Development Bank have estimated that rebuilding Afghanistan will call for US\$1.7 billion in the coming year and US\$4.9 billion over 30 months. So far, Afghanistan has been a country with the highest Kalashnikov count, rock bottom social indicators, a three-year drought and 10 million landmines hidden throughout the countryside. Electricity supply is erratic and communication links with the outside world are poor, being confined to satellite phone or one of the Telecom department's 97 phone lines. The country's 20 million people are in dire straits, which is typified by the fact that one third of Kabul's estimated one million population are fed by international agencies.

Moving Caspian Sea's gas and oil to the south may become a reality under the new dispensation. The economic route to Afghanistan from the north seems to hold promise and the southern route from Pakistan has lost its pre-eminence in view of its uncertainties and volatility. India's intermediate economy helped the country until the 1980s; its projects for rural electrification, small-scale industrial units and irrigation remain more suitable for the Afghan scene than those on offer from the sophisticated multinational companies. Indian companies such as Larsen & Toubro, Kirloskar Brothers, Continental Construction and UP State Bridge Corp. were trying to secure projects in the country. Apart from natural gas, Afghanistan is rich in uranium and semi-precious stones such as ruby and emerald.

For its size, the country has large coal reserves, proved deposits of high-grade coal being placed at 100 Mt and probable reserves being 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, Ishpushta near Doshi to the north of Kabul and 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 ore reserves in the neighbourhood at 360 Mt with 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. The total reserves were estimated at 2,000 billion m³ some years ago and there was a proposal to add 1,000 billion m³ to the exploitable quantum. 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 Bamyān Province, are a repository of high-grade iron ore, estimated at 1,700 Mt. Bamyān was the scene of incredible vandalism during the Taliban regime when centuries old, rare Buddha statues were raised 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.