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Business Opportunities Well Beyond Reconstruction

By - 3/28/2005

San Diego Business Journal Staff

BY JULIE POUCHER HARBIN

The Virginia-based Afghan-American Chamber of Commerce was founded in 2002 to provide a unified voice for the Afghan business sector.

Following the formation last summer of its Kabul-based sister organization the Afghan International Chamber of Commerce, which advocates for business to the new Afghan government the AACC has put more emphasis on fostering U.S.-Afghan trade and ensuring that Afghan economic development remains a priority for U.S. policy-makers.

The AACC helps form joint ventures by matching investors with potential partners, and publicizes requests for proposals and other opportunities in Afghanistan.

Atiq Panjshiri, the founding president of the chamber, said it has more than 60 members who hail from more than a dozen states, including California, Virginia, Massachusetts, Maryland, New York and New Jersey, and he hopes to double the membership during the next three months through an active membership recruitment campaign.

Panjshiri was asked to elaborate on the work of the AACC and the opportunities for investors in Afghanistan's emerging democracy.

Q: Are all of your members currently doing business in Afghanistan?

A: Almost all of our members have plans to or are currently doing business in or with Afghanistan. After the invasion in the 1980s, many of our members had to abandon prosperous businesses there factories, trading companies, service businesses, all sorts. I am most encouraged that some of our members are second-generation Afghan-Americans who are trying to give back to Afghanistan with their own unique talents and energy. Many are working to pick up the pieces of family businesses. We certainly will be trying to encourage these younger entrepreneurs and to teach them not only about business, but also about business's vital role in the health and stability of a nation.

Q: How many members are Afghan-Americans and how many are not Afghan-Americans?

A: I don't have specific figures, but we have an increasing number of non-Afghan businesses that want to be a part of the rebuilding and development process. We very much welcome these businesses, as we will need a broad coalition of industries, experience and voices to have a lasting impact.

Q: In what business sectors in Afghanistan do they work?

A: Our members come from many different sectors. There is not a single type of business that was not impacted by the last 25 years of strife not just war, but also the complete neglect of economic development and the infrastructure upon which businesses depend. It's important to

understand that this economic neglect is not part of our heritage. Afghanistan has always been a trading and commercial culture. In the 1970s, Afghanistan was roughly on par with countries like Pakistan and South Korea in economic development, but its further development was interrupted, and indeed, thrown backward. Many of our members, like me, were raised in a time of economic prosperity and development in Afghanistan. Now we're trying to reclaim that heritage.

Q: What are the benefits and obstacles for Americans interested in doing business in Afghanistan?

A: The benefits are many. Afghanistan needs practically everything, from manufacturing to consumer goods to basic infrastructure. It's important not just to import these things to Afghanistan in containers, but to enable Afghanistan to create production facilities to meet its own needs internally, and then eventually for Afghanistan to begin exporting again. This is the kind of investment we are trying hard to encourage.

Much of the focus for international donors over the last two years has been on infrastructure: roads, schools, clinics, housing, power and rightly so. There is still tremendous need for these things, but the range of opportunities for private investment extends well beyond reconstruction.

We believe that Afghanistan can once again reclaim its strategic position as a trading center. Afghanistan also is a country rich in mineral wealth and has been a major agricultural exporter. As the infrastructure is rebuilt, these resources can be tapped. Businesses that establish themselves now could be building the groundwork for a regional presence with unprecedented opportunities. We are certainly keeping that long-term goal fresh in (the) minds of lawmakers in Congress and in the administration.

As for obstacles, one of the key pieces is re-establishing the courts. We hear this again and again from businesses.

Private investment will not be significant until there is ready access to commercial credit, and that requires legal protection for the rights of investors, backed by courts and the rule of law. Afghanistan has taken huge steps to address this need its investment law is a model of openness and progress within the region, and the Karzai administration is openly pro-business and pro-investment. The next step is to adopt a new commercial code and revive the court system to enforce and defend things like property rights and resolve contract disputes and so on.

Q: What are the best bet investment and trade sectors in Afghanistan for Americans interested in starting a business or engaging in trade there?

A: The best bet is to apply what you know to business opportunities in Afghanistan. We're here to help businesses match their skills and resources to potential partners and to provide opportunities for investment. There is room for growth and investment in all sectors. If you can make it, grow it, fix it or sell it here, you can probably do that in Afghanistan too. The sky's the limit.

Former San Diego Business Journal reporter Julie Poucher Harbin is a freelance reporter based in Kabul, Afghanistan. She has lived in Kabul since June, and spent several months working as a print journalism trainer with the London-based Institute for War and Peace Reporting.