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Wall Street Journal: What I Saw in Afghanistan

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HEADLINE: What I Saw in Afghanistan

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This week has been a study in contrasts. On Sunday, I was in one of the most remote areas of Afghanistan - where unpaved roads are lined by tin-roofed shanties, and most people live without running water or electricity.

Today, I am in the City of Light. Yet while the circumstances of these visits could not be more different, their purpose is the same: to reaffirm the world's commitment to the people of Afghanistan.

This morning, a delegation representing 80 countries and multilateral organizations will gather here for the International Conference in Support of Afghanistan. This event is a chance for developed nations to learn more about the challenges facing Afghanistan - and to offer the political and economic assistance it needs to recover from decades of war and oppression.

When the Taliban were driven from power in 2001, they left Afghans to build a society from nothing. But working in partnership with the United States and other nations, the Afghan people have made amazing progress. Since the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan's infant-mortality rate has been reduced by almost 25%. Its per capita GDP has increased by 70%. In 2001, only 8% of Afghans had access to basic health care. Today, that number is 85%. In 2001, fewer than a million Afghan children were in school - all of them boys. Today, more than six million Afghan children are in school - about a third of them are girls.

On my trip, I saw how these developments are offering Afghans new hope. Yet many hurdles still lie ahead - and my trip was a reminder of those, too. The new schools and roads I visited stood in the shadow of Bamiyan's sandstone cliffs - where two hollow caves are all that remains of Afghanistan's ancient Buddhas, blown up by the Taliban in 2001. Those scars in the cliffsides are a reminder of the danger lurking in the Afghan hills. It's a danger we read about on the front pages, as the Taliban and al Qaeda step up their campaign of suicide bombings and violence. And it is a danger that threatens to erase the progress that Afghans have made.

This morning, President Hamid Karzai will present his government's five-year plan for securing that progress. The Afghan National Development Strategy defines how the government will work to improve education and health care, and to address the nation's overwhelming poverty and lack of basic infrastructure. The plan also addresses energy and agriculture needs. Right now, only 12% of Afghans have access to electricity. And an agricultural crisis threatens starvation. Mr. Karzai has urged farmers to

grow wheat instead of poppy, so that they and their neighbors will not go hungry.

The national strategy is a solid plan to address Afghanistan's many challenges, and it is clear that Afghanistan will also need solid support from its international partners. At today's conference, the United States will pledge \$10.2 billion toward the nation's development efforts. This comes on top of the \$5.9 billion we committed in 2006 at the donor conference in London. And it means that our commitment of humanitarian, development, and security assistance since 2001 now totals more than \$26 billion.

Other nations are doing their part. In Kandahar, Canada has provided literacy training for more than 5,000 Afghans, and vaccinated more than 360,000 against polio. In Helmand, the United Kingdom has brought clean drinking water to more than 175,000 people, and provided microcredit to more than 336,000 small businesses. Training programs run by Germany and other nations have helped put more than 58,000 soldiers and 80,000 police on the streets. And in Bamiyan, I met the New Zealand troops who are providing security and promoting development.

Private citizens are eager to help. I'm proud to be a member of the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council, which President Bush and President Karzai launched in 2002. Through the council, individual American citizens have secured more than \$70 million in private-sector funding for a total of 30 programs. Council initiatives have trained women judges, lawyers, entrepreneurs, midwives and parliamentarians. In fact, many of the projects I observed on my trip were council initiatives. I have met children orphaned by Taliban massacres who now have classrooms to study in and safe homes to live in. And I watched women once forbidden to leave home without a male escort now run businesses that provide for their families.

Today's conference is an opportunity for governments and the private sector to do more. It is important - and smart - for the world to invest in Afghanistan. Americans learned on a clear September morning that misery and oppression half a world away can manifest themselves on the next block. That lesson has been retaught in the years since, in cities from Jakarta to London to Madrid.

Our security depends on preventing al Qaeda from re-establishing a foothold in Afghanistan. The best way to do that is to counter al Qaeda's campaign of terror with an international campaign of support for Afghan democracy.

It is also important for the world to invest in Afghanistan because the Afghan people have invested so much themselves. On my trip, one of the people who impressed me most is Afghanistan's only female provincial governor, Habiba Sarabi.

Gov. Sarabi's province, Bamiyan, is one of Afghanistan's poorest. Every day, she risks her life to serve her people, and under her leadership the region shows immense promise. The number of children attending school, and the percentage of students who are girls, are both higher than the national average. I was also inspired by the courage of the women I met in Bamiyan's police-training program. In a place where the law once prohibited women from learning how to read, I saw a class of female recruits studying Afghanistan's constitution and preparing to defend the rule of law in their new democracy.

Bamiyan shows us how determined the Afghan people are to see their country succeed, and now the international community must do its part to help make that success possible. As one Afghan woman told me when she visited the White House in January: "This is our only chance."

Today, as leaders from across the globe gather in Paris, we need to show with our commitments that the

world will not let this chance pass Afghanistan by.

Mrs. Bush is the first lady of the United States.

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