

# REMEMBERING USAID'S ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN, 1985-1994

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DURING A CRITICAL DECADE IN AFGHANISTAN,  
USAID SUCCESSFULLY OPERATED A "MISSION IN EXILE."

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BY THOMAS H. EIGHMY

The activities of the United States Agency for International Development in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation and its aftermath have been less well documented than the role of the Central Intelligence Agency. Unlike the CIA, USAID is an open institution. Its budget is a matter of public record and, typically, its officers and activities are well known in the numerous countries where it operates programs with host-government counterparts. It is perhaps worthwhile, given the situation in Afghanistan today, to consider the highly atypical and difficult conditions under which USAID operated rather effectively from 1985 to 1994.

The substantial involvement of USAID/Afghanistan in agriculture, health, education, public administration and disaster relief programs from the 1950s to the 1970s ground to a halt in 1978-1979. In rapid succession, a coup brought the Soviet-influenced People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan to power; U.S. Ambassador "Spike" Dubs was assassinated; and, faced with popular unrest, the Soviets invoked the "Brezhnev Doctrine" to invade in late 1979 in support of their client. With varying degrees of success under a string of Afghan leaders, the Soviets continued their support for the PDPA until after their military withdrawal in 1989.

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Meanwhile, the U.S. embassy maintained a skeletal staff until its closing prior to the Soviet withdrawal, reopening only in December 2001. From 1985 to 1994, USAID undertook to operate an interim Afghan "mission in exile."

## Getting Started

Until 1985, the U.S. funneled most of its non-lethal assistance through the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Pakistan. Many hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees were pouring across the border. Pakistan's principled support for the Afghan refugees inside its borders and the active resistance both to the PDPA and the Soviets inside Afghanistan helped to influence the U.S. decision to provide a wider range of assistance.

Thus was born the Office of the USAID Representative for Afghanistan Affairs or, less formally, O/AID/Rep. It would deal with humanitarian assistance only and run a principally rural-based program, because the towns were held by the PDPA. Except near the Pakistan border, fighting in many of the rural areas was sporadic and shifting.

Operating such a complex program from distant Washington made no sense. And for security, logistics and other reasons, USAID could not operate directly from resistance areas inside Afghanistan. The bordering Soviet republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were off-limits, as was Iran, given relations with the U.S. following the hostage crisis. The Chinese-Afghanistan border was short, remote and otherwise unacceptable.

The only possible major logistics base for the Afghan resistance was Pakistan, with its major seaport, airport and road transport routes. Its long, porous border, with a difficult terrain, was home to a large ethnic Pashtun community on both sides. U.S. support for the Afghan resistance depended upon

Pakistan. And that ally, in its existence-threatening confrontation with the Soviet Union at that time, would also benefit from U.S. assistance to the resistance.

The overall program effectiveness and operational details of O/AID/Rep owe much to the office's first director, Larry Crandall. He and some Washington allies moved USAID to support a non-traditional country program with an office in exile and a non-traditional counterpart. The main office was housed in Embassy Islamabad, deliberately separate from, and largely independent of, USAID/Pakistan. Operational offices were soon established in Peshawar and Quetta close to the Afghan border, where most contractors and grantees with their large, qualified Afghan staffs were housed and trained. (For security reasons, U.S. staff were not permitted to enter Afghanistan.)

The non-traditional counterpart was Pakistan's now well-known InterServices Intelligence Directorate, which proved to be a generally supportive and effective counterpart, interfering little in the movement of humanitarian and developmental supplies and staff.

Beginning in the last two months of Fiscal Year 1985 with limited and previously obligated but unexpended funds, the program grew in size and scope to about \$250 million. It included PL-480 Title Two food aid and more than 100 "McCollum Flights," which transported the Afghan war wounded for prearranged pro bono treatment in the U.S., Europe and Japan. The Primary and Mother/Child Health and Education programs alone totaled over \$140 million, with one annual obligation of \$70 million supporting 15 contractors, grantees and multinational NGOs.

A little-used Foreign Assistance Act "notwithstanding clause" multiplied the U.S. budget obligations. This permitted binding provisions on a given program to be waived in the interests of the U.S. government. However, those interests had to be codified and reduced to a decision memo, and no unlawful activities were allowed. Medical supplies and pharmaceuticals from quality-tested and certified U.S., multinational or Pakistani manufacturers, produced in Pakistan, could be substituted for U.S.-made materials. (Items that cost \$1,000 when purchased in the United States could be delivered in Pakistan for \$200.) This boosted the local economy, shortened supply lines and greatly magnified the humanitarian impact of the health program for Afghans.

A logistics and transport program airlifted Tennessee mules for transport of donated or purchased humanitarian supplies, built roads and constructed a strategic, U.S.-sup-

plied, movable steel Bailey Bridge across the Konar River. This provided access to northern Afghanistan, bypassing the principal north-south routes held by the PDPA. A mine-detecting dog program proved an effective multiethnic, humanitarian and national institution that continued into the current decade. Training and salaries to several thousand Afghan staff boosted institutions and economies in the Pakistan border areas and Afghanistan.

### **A Unique Structure**

U.S. project officers and implementers operating in Pakistan enjoyed remarkable freedom from interference in carrying out these programs, due partly to the unique structure of the organization and the high morale of O/AID/Rep staff. The informal motto was "Ready, fire, AIM" (the acronym standing for "Activity Identification Memo" — an O/AID/Rep substitute for the more ponderous USAID project development paperwork normally required).

O/AID/Rep programs also enjoyed the cooperation of the Afghan resistance organizations and good relations with the Pakistani ISI to a degree not possible with the lethal assistance — the subject of "blowback."

The health and education programs, for example, were able to finesse the ISI standard that all assistance had to be distributed through one of the seven Pakistani registered political organizations, several of whom were known to be extremist. (It should also be noted that Islamic-funded health and education NGOs declined to join in coordination efforts with USAID and other donors.) The health and education programs expanded from the border areas to serve anywhere in the country based on population distribution, and regardless of dominant ethnic or party affiliation. Project implementers were encouraged to switch the focus of training and implementation from U.S. and third-country staff operating out of Pakistan to Afghan trainers working inside Afghanistan. U.S. staff in Pakistan provided logistics support and quality control.

O/AID/Rep was generally the largest, and sometimes the sole, bilateral contributor to programs assisting the majority of Afghans who remained in the country. It directed assistance to resistance-controlled areas, whose population was estimated in 1990 as exceeding eight million (excluding refugees, war dead and populations under PDPA control). The resilience of the Afghan people and the level of outside support for those remaining in the country under often-appalling conditions contributed, as intended, to blunting the Soviet depopulation and "scorched earth" policy. This

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*Afghans date  
America's abandonment  
of them from  
April 1992.*

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reduced the refugee flow to Pakistan and encouraged the withdrawal of Soviet forces, leading to the ultimate collapse of the PDPA regime.

### What Happened

Unfortunately, this auspicious start to the post-Soviet era would not persist. The humanitarian and development program peaked in the early 1990s. Momentum for the financial, operational and strategic retrenchment of the O/AID/Rep program began with the withdrawal of Soviet forces in February 1989. Several parallel tracks of events followed in short order.

- Administratively, O/AID/Rep was “regularized,” dealing less with the ISI and more with Pakistani civil authorities. In 1992, programs were running on money still in the pipeline. Later the mission was folded into USAID/Pakistan. This move was understandable in light of scarce operating expense funds, but it signaled a lack of U.S.

long-term commitment to Afghanistan.

- Soviet aid to the PDPA continued briefly, but frontal assaults on Jalalabad and Khost failed. The collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 ended external support for the PDPA.

- With the Soviets gone, Pakistan’s ambitions in Afghanistan, muted during the Soviet occupation, were again advanced by proxies. Pakistan created an Afghan Interim Government, complete with ministries of health and education. O/AID/Rep officers tried to treat the AIG as if it were a normal host-country government in 1991. But it was a bare recasting of the seven Pakistani-registered political parties. While it might have been regarded at the time as part of a necessary transition to the establishment of a broad-based Afghan regime in Kabul, it quickly proved to be an unsuccessful precursor.

- In April 1992, the mujahedeen captured Kabul and forced Najibul-

lah, the PDPA leader at the time, to take refuge in the United Nations compound. The PDPA regime came to an end.

- Instead of facilitating a peaceful transition from Peshawar to Kabul, the AIG fractured. Power-sharing and control of Kabul were the first bones of contention. Then savage fighting broke out among the seven parties of the Pakistani resistance alliance and with those outside it.

### What Might Have Been

The resulting civil war period and the rise of the Taliban have been well analyzed and, in any case, lie beyond the scope of this article. From my perspective, however, it seems that personnel from State’s Bureau of Diplomatic Security were allowed to serve as a screen for a policy of U.S. disengagement from Afghanistan. DS’s concern was that the situation in Kabul was insecure and dangerous, as indeed it was. DS argued that Embassy Kabul, whose skeletal staff had been evacuated in 1989, should not be reopened.

Senior policymakers concurred, noting that overall strategic aims had been achieved with the Soviet withdrawal and that Afghanistan was now of peripheral interest. A one-dimensional security view conveniently stood for overall policy.

Afghans date America’s abandonment of them from April 1992. This withdrawal occurred despite the fact that officers from the State Department and O/AID/Rep, and probably the CIA, were prepared to open the embassy on a skeletal basis and serve there voluntarily. These officers were knowledgeable about and accepted by the Afghan actors — and had safely carried out their activities amidst the turmoil of Peshawar, Quetta and the border for nearly nine years.

How much future bloodshed, Afghan and American, might have been prevented had they been allowed to try? ■

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