

Solar power lights up Kapisa province



Afghan Minister for Rural Development Ehsan Zia (left), Indian Ambassador Rakesh Sood (right), and project officials with a solar lantern

Abdul Gayoom, a resident of the Mullah Khatir Khel village in Kapisa province, cannot contain his excitement at the solar panels set up in his home, which light up two bulbs in his living room and bedroom. This is the first time his village is seeing electricity and the transformation is remarkable. Gayoom beams with pride and says: "From now on, no more oil lamps, which cost me quite a bit of money from my farm income." Gayoom's neighbour, Abdul Haq, too, is equally ecstatic. With a broad grin, Haq says, "My children now can study even at night and I can take this lantern wherever and whenever I want. Whether it is the kitchen in the night, or the fields early morning, it is no more a problem. It is a great blessing." Both Gayoom and Haq are talking about the solar lanterns provided by India to the village under a \$750-million assistance programme for Afghanistan.

In energy starved Afghanistan, renewable energy is being seen as one of the key long-term and sustainable options. Nowhere such urgency is felt more than in the remote, infra-structurally underdeveloped and inaccessible hilly regions, where it would be logistically daunting and extremely expensive to provide grid electricity, given the high costs of transmission and distribution.

Recognising this complex task and the importance of providing electricity to remote

areas, the Indian government undertook the task of electrifying 100 villages in the remote hilly regions of Afghanistan by harnessing solar power.

Kapisa province is one of the five provinces benefiting from the solar project, the others being Badakhshan, Balkh, Bagdhis and Kandahar. The project is being implemented by Central Electronics Limited (CEL), with Afghan Solar as the local partner. It covers 20 villages each in the five provinces, covering nearly 5,500 households.

Each household has been provided a home lighting system with a 40-watt solar panel capacity, which will light up two CFL bulbs and one portable solar lantern.

Additionally, in each village, the central mosque has also been provided with a 80-watt solar panel capacity that will light up three lamps and provide power to the public address system for prayer and communications. To provide back-up services for the solar system for a period of five years, 20 local resource persons have been trained.

The state-of-art solar technology has been developed indigenously by CEL and has met all international technical standards. CEL has similarly executed village electrification projects on turn-key bases in more than 1,000 villages in India, Nepal, Myanmar, Africa (Mali, Sudan, Senegal, Namibia, Zambia), South and Central America (Colombia and Cuba)

and Syria. In Afghanistan, in 2006, CEL had also solar electrified a teachers' training centre in Shegnan in Badakhshan province under an Indian government project in collaboration with the Agha Khan Development Network at a cost of \$0.7 million.

The project in Kapisa province was inaugurated by the Afghan Minister for Rural Development Mohammad, Ehsan Zia, and the Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan, Rakesh Sood, on October 10 with a large number of locals attending the function. Several dignitaries including the Governor of Kapisa, Ghulam Ghus Abubakar, and Member of Parliament from Haji, Mohammad Iqbal, were also present.

Speaking on the occasion, Zia described India's help as timely and most advantageous for the power starved Afghanistan. He said that such technologies using natural renewable resources would help greatly in Afghanistan's rebuilding.

Ambassador Sood said that training of local stakeholders in the installation and maintenance of the solar systems was an integral part of the project.

The success of the project in Kapisa has inspired other provinces who now want to be included under the scheme. Meanwhile, there is high excitement in Mullah Khatir Khel and adjoining villages and the atmosphere is truly electric! ■