

Vocational Training Centre at Bagh-e-Zanana

Decades of civil strife and hardline rule by the Taliban regime have left the majority of Afghan women battled and illiterate. This has consequently set up the monumental challenge of education and empowerment of women, for the Afghan government.

Fully conscious of the Afghan government's needs and priorities, India is considering setting up of a women's vocational training Centre at Bagh-e-Zanana in Kabul, under the management of the Ministry of Women's Affairs — as part of its assistance programme for Afghanistan.

The project was announced by Mrs. Manmohan Singh, wife of the Indian Prime Minister, during his state visit to Afghanistan in August, 2005. It will be implemented by Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA). Since 1972, SEWA has been engaged in organising the poorer sections of women in India, mainly in rural areas, for sustainable livelihoods and economic security. It has also taken some successful women empowerment initiatives in select countries overseas.

In pursuance of the women empowerment project, a six-member SEWA team visited Kabul from November 2 to 14 for undertaking a



Minister of Women's Affairs Dr. Hasan Bano Ghazanfar and Indian Ambassador Rakesh Sood with the SEWA delegation and Afghan women entrepreneurs.

pre-feasibility study on the setting up of the proposed Centre. It had widespread interaction with various women organisations, cooperatives, skills development centres, local and international NGOs, other donor organisations as well as United Nations bodies — in the sectors of handicrafts, doll-making, gems cutting, mobile repairs, solar lantern assembling, tailoring, food processing and fashion designing.

The SEWA project will seek to impart vocational training, especially to the poor and destitute women, building upon traditional local skills as well as

available resources and infrastructure. The areas proposed to be covered are embroidery, weaving, tailoring, food processing, packaging, design and product development as well as upgradation of marketing and managements skills. The management structures of Bagh-e-Zanana will also be endeavoured to be strengthened.

The project is likely to be taken up in early-2007. The officials of the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs can't conceal their excitement, and are looking forward to providing their full support to the SEWA team. ■

International Students Day celebrated at the Embassy

On the afternoon of November 12, all roads led to the Indian Embassy in Kabul. The occasion was the first-time celebration of International Students Day, with participation of students, officials and other Afghan personnel who had studied in India under the various scholarship schemes of the Government of India.

Since 2001, India has been engaged extensively in the skills development of the Afghan work force, crippled during the decades of conflict. As many as 1,663 Afghan nationals have availed of the scholarships and training programmes offered by the Government of India so far under various schemes, including the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) Scholarship Scheme, Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme for public administrators and the various special training programmes in diplomacy, medicine, journalism, forensic science, medicine, parliamentary studies, teachers' training, etc. Last year, during his visit to Afghanistan, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh announced new schemes of 500 long-term University Scholarships as well as 500 short-term training programmes.

Around 250 Afghan nationals attended the event. Almost all Ministries and institutions



Photo left, Afghan Deputy Minister for Higher Education Suraya Paikar addressing the audience at the function. Photo right, Ambassador Rakesh Sood with a group of officials trained in India.

of the Afghan Government were represented.

The students warmly reminisced on their "Indian experience" which, they said, also gave them a unique opportunity to familiarise themselves, on a first-hand basis, with the polity, economy and socio-cultural conditions of the country. Many also proclaimed that although they had gone for educational courses in other countries as well, the education provided in India was of the best quality.

The function was also used to throw open a discussion on the possible formation of an Afghan Alumni Association, which could provide an institutional platform to the Afghans trained in India to be able to maintain their established ties with India. It is the Embassy view that the Association could also be effectively used for organising bilateral seminars, business and cultural out-

reach and other events, and thereby become an important platform for further expansion of mutually beneficial ties in all fields. The participants enthusiastically welcomed the idea of the Alumni Association. Appropriate mechanisms will be adopted to determine the

structure and activities of the Association.

A film on India's Assistance Programme, 'The Road to Afghanistan', was screened at the function, which gave the participants a good idea of the vast dimension of India's developmental programmes in Afghanistan, embracing all fields, including hydro-electricity; power transmission lines; road construction; agriculture; industry; telecommunications; information and broadcasting; education, health, skills development, etc.

Judging by its success, the Embassy proposes to make the function an annual event. Clearly, it considers these students and trainees as its best vantage constituency in Afghanistan and would wish to engage with them constructively for the further expansion of the rich bilateral ties existent between the two countries. ■