

IALC-USAID Sustainable Development of Drylands
Trip Report – Visit to Afghanistan and Pakistan
Written by John W. Santas
Approved by Oval Myers, Jr., Abdul Qayyum Khan and John S. Russin
September 8 - 22, 2006

Purpose of Trip:

1. Plan year five (FY/CY2007) of the Afghanistan-Pakistan component “Human Capacity Development for the Agriculture Sector in Afghanistan”. 2. Begin to wrap up current phase of the Balkh University Faculty of Agriculture (BUFA) project and explore future involvement.

Executive Summary:

Principal accomplishments, explained in detail under the daily log of activities, were:

1. Our relationship with the Balkh University Faculty of Agriculture (BUFA) has matured to the point where a real working partnership has been achieved. This was formalized via a Memorandum of Understanding, signed during our visit. BUFA is seeing genuine value and purpose in the assistance they have received up to this point, and the SIUC/UIUC/NWFPAU consortium wants to continue this relationship. Much remains to be done. Various avenues and mechanisms are being pursued to continue this mutually beneficial relationship beyond the much-too-brief 18 month life-of-funding. A four-page “Summary of Activities” during our six-day stay at BUFA is attached to this report.
2. A Grant Agreement was signed and carried back to Illinois, transferring \$266,692 from the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation (MAI) to support M.Sc. study at the NWFPAU by 10 Subject Matter Specialists and Program Leaders from the Extension Department.
3. As per advice from representatives of USAID-Kabul, we will explore possibilities of cooperation with Purdue University and Washington State University, to assist with Global Development Alliances they are managing and higher education initiatives underway such as “Afghans Building Capacity” and “Afghan eQuality Alliances”.
4. Continuing attention was given to our long-standing NWFPAU relationship, through a campus visit and in-depth discussions with a wide range of faculty and administrators. The support and cooperation of this Pakistani University has been absolutely crucial to the success of our component known as “Human Capacity Development for the Agriculture Sector in Afghanistan”. These on-site contacts are invaluable.
5. Discussions within the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation (MAI) have helped us identify additional areas where our consortium might provide services. Examples of this are short term and long term training programs needed by other MAI Divisions and Departments in addition to Extension. We believe we can also help the Ministry develop and implement its plans to establish regional “Centers of Excellence”.

- Continued interaction with the Ministry of Higher Education may lead to innovative approaches that will help them deal with the huge task they face in upgrading all university teaching faculty to at least the Masters-Degree level. At this stage, according to most estimates, at least 80% of the faculty hold only B.S. degrees that were awarded by the university in which they are now teaching. There is much to be done.

Routing:

Outbound:

Champaign and St. Louis/Chicago (AA) – London (AA) – Islamabad (BA) – Peshawar (surface) – Kabul (PIA) - Mazar-e-Sharif (surface)

Inbound:

Mazar-e-Sharif – Kabul (surface) – Islamabad (PIA) – London (BA) – Chicago/Champaign and St. Louis (AA)

Daily Log of Activities:

- Friday, September 8 – Departed Illinois
- Saturday, September 9 – In Transit through London/Heathrow
- Sunday, September 10 - Arrive Islamabad and travel to Peshawar by road

Arrived Islamabad at 6:00am, started process of tracing Santas' lost luggage and went to the Serena Hotel for breakfast and initial discussions with Qayyum. After a driving tour and selected stops to acquaint Russin with Islamabad, we drove to Peshawar with a stop at the Tarnab Agricultural Research Institute. Checked in at the Pearl Continental Hotel. Enjoyed a working dinner with past and present Vice Chancellors as well as selected faculty who: A) had served as consultants on the BUFA project and B) represented plant protection disciplines, (to coincide with Russin's interests) and C) were scheduled to meet with us during our campus visit the next day. For Myers and Santas, this was a delightful evening with old friends/colleagues; and for Russin, an introduction to a group with deep loyalties to UIUC/SIUC.

Monday, September 11

A two-hour meeting in the Vice Chancellor's conference room was attended by Deans of Faculties, Heads of Departments, and Directors of selected units. Used this time to:

- * Thank them for contributions to our Afghan training activities
- * Explain plans to reduce short-term training and increase M.Sc. degree study
- * Discuss the availability of HEC funding to continue our linkage and working relationship after expiration of the USAID-ANE Cooperative Agreement
- * Introduce them to the new website and its use as a marketing tool
- * Hear the views of our collaborators on a wide variety of topics

This was followed by a meeting with Dr. Farhatullah, Director of Graduate Studies and Research, who informed us that Rs 6.510 million (\$107,500) was released by HEC (Higher Education Commission) to support linkage activities that had been proposed by the NWFPAU/UIUC/SIUC consortium. We had initiated this process about one year ago.

The balance of the morning was used to tour the new English Language Resource Center and Office of International Programs and Services (both established with AID-Islamabad buy-in funds), the library and the Biotechnology/Genetic Engineering Institute.

After lunch we went to the airport for a 3:00pm departure to Kabul. Met by our Afghan driver (Babrak) and transferred to the ASSA2 guest house for a two-night stay.

Tuesday, September 12

Started the day with a courtesy call on Professor Mohsini, Dean of Agriculture at Kabul University. He and Dr. Qayyum maintain a close relationship. While most of our contacts and cooperators in Kabul are continually changing, Dean Mohsini provides stability.

Went to the USAID compound, where we were fortunate to meet with four key contacts assembled in a conference room. They were: Chris Shephard, representing the Education Office (John McCloud's replacement), Randy Chester, Agriculture Officer (Dan Miller's replacement), and Lane Smith, who manages capacity building projects in higher education, that cut across various sectors and disciplines. Shahnaz Hakim, our principal contact for the BUFA Project (representing the Education Office) also attended.

The primary reason for this meeting was to discuss our proposal to continue the Balkh University Faculty of Agriculture (BUFA) project beyond its present December 31, 2006 expiration. They liked our ideas (the proposal had been sent in advance), especially plans to deliver technical assistance via the internet. We may receive some support directly from the mission, but for now, we were encouraged to work with ongoing Purdue University and Washington State University projects that are providing assistance to higher education in agriculture. We were fortunate that the Washington State University representative (Maria Beebe) was in Kabul and in the AID compound at the time of our visit. She gave us an explanation of initiatives known as "Afghans Building Capacity" and "21st Century Universities for Afghanistan". The Purdue representative (Kevin McNamara) was back on campus, so we will arrange a meeting with him in West Lafayette, IN after our return.

After lunch at the AID cafeteria, we went to the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, to meet with the Extension Director, Dr. Fazel. He accepted the contract that will fund M.Sc. study at the NWFPAU for ten of his staff members, and had requested approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The letter of approval was delivered while we were in his office, so the Minister will sign the contract and return that document to UIUC. Funds will be transferred to UIUC and then to the Field Office, hopefully allowing these students to begin in January, 2007. We also discussed the National Soybean Development plan with Dr. Fazel before

taking our leave and thanking him for his confidence in Dr. Qayyum's ability as a scholarship administrator and in the NWFPAU. Returned to guest house to work on email.

Wednesday, September 13

Left Kabul at 6:00am for the road trip to Mazar-e-Sharif, arrived at 2:30 and checked in at the Kefayat Hotel. NEI (Nutrition and Education International) personnel in Afghanistan had asked Russin and Myers to inspect soybean fields in the Mazar area, so the four of us linked up with the NEI agronomist and two local advisory staff. This gave us an opportunity to see rural areas, meet farmers, and walk through soybean fields that should yield quite well. Our dinner discussion was on plans for our six-day stay at Balkh University.

Thursday, September 14

Started the day by meeting with Faculty of Agriculture members, except for Dean Ansari, who was in Kabul with President Habib. We updated them on the timetable for project wrap-up as well as our continuing efforts to find support for a project extension. We discussed equipment needs, then visited the faculty work room and computer laboratory that has been established through our project. Next we toured the on-campus agronomy/horticulture demonstration farm that has become a very impressive operation, due in large part to the efforts of our JDA (Joint Development Associates) partner Mark Henning. Returned to the hotel to prepare an equipment list prior to our shopping for these items. After lunch we visited three computer shops to get quotations on our listed items, then returned to make decisions on purchases that are within our budget. My lost baggage caught up with me (through the help of Mr. Agha), so I was able to pull out a stack of papers that I had planned to work through while elbow-to-elbow with Qayyum – things that can't be done at long distance – so we had the first round in what will be a series of discussions on a long list of topics.

Friday, September 15

Friday is a "closed and religious" day, so we had no specific agenda. The four of us had breakfast together, then got into a development philosophy and project planning discussion that lasted until noon. After a lunch break, we spent the afternoon working in our rooms.

Saturday, September 16

Got to campus at 8:30am, to begin set up for Russin's 9:00am presentation on "Plant Diseases". A cluster of students engaged him in lively conversation during the set up process, while the auditorium filled with 200+ attendees (including 10 female students) with the Faculty of Agriculture Professors in the front row. His Power Point presentation was a beautiful example of university teaching USA style. The students really got involved. Russin stopped taking questions after two hours in front of the group, so we could get back to the computer shop and purchase the equipment, materials and supplies we had scouted on Thursday.

Returned to the hotel after lunch to work individually, which was followed by a 4:00pm team meeting. At 5:00pm, Mark Henning, our JDA collaborator, came to meet with us

at the hotel for an informative discussion that continued through dinner. Having spent 2 years in Mazar and having a close relationship with BUFA, Mark is a good source of information.

Sunday, September 17

Went to campus and started the day by giving Mr. Shamsi (Acting Dean) survey instruments to be completed by all members of the Agriculture Faculty, giving their assessment of all activities and consultancies that had been completed during the life of project.

Myers then gave his lecture on Plant Genetic Resources to an auditorium full of students and staff. An electricity outage forced him to do this without his Power Point presentation. Mark Henning joined us, so after that was finished, Myers, Russin and Henning took some 150 students and a few Professors to the demonstration farm to explain a range of disease, genetic and agronomic principles.

The computers and related equipment had been delivered and were being installed, so we monitored that process and identified a few items yet to be purchased. After lunch we purchased those remaining items, did some souvenir shopping and visited the historic mosque. That evening we had dinner at the home of Mark and Shannon Henning and their five children. After return, we made arrangements for a wrap-up dinner meeting with the Faculty of Agriculture at the Kefayat Hotel the following evening prior to departure.

Monday, September 18

Did follow-up work on the completion and return of survey instruments that were distributed yesterday and circulated reminders about the dinner at 7:30pm this evening.

Assembled a group of 50+ students in an effort to determine whether our faculty improvement activities had reached the student level and whether they were even aware of this project. Russin explained a one-page questionnaire, after which he engaged them in discussion around the following questions: What is good about your university? What is not-so-good about this university? Where do you need help? The end result, in terms of needs identified, was similar to results of the strategic planning session we had completed with the faculty in November 2005. The students appreciated being part of this process.

After this stimulating session, we stopped at the computer room to check on the arrival and installation of the equipment purchased yesterday. At that point, Dean Ansari caught up with us, having returned early from his conference in Kabul. We went to his office to hear his words of welcome, update him on our activities, and discuss the supplies/equipment that we were leaving. We worked on the equipment handing-over process and documents, then agreed on items of business to be covered during our dinner meeting this evening.

The wrap-up dinner was attended by staff and students from the Faculty of Agriculture. About half the group was students, some very sharp ones, which says something positive about the future of the university and country. After dinner, Vice President Hashimi signed the MOU, followed by speech-making and distribution of gifts carried by Russin. Mark

Henning was with us. The group broke up after three enjoyable hours together. Whether this is the end of the Illinois-Balkh connection, in terms of consultation visits, is unknown.

Tuesday, September 19

Left at 6:00am for the long road trip back to Kabul, reaching the ASSA2 guest house at 2:00pm. Worked on email messages and had a pre-dinner team meeting.

Wednesday, September 20

Started by meeting with Mr. Najeebullah, Director of International Relations in the Ministry of Higher Education. He briefed us on last week's first-ever national conference that brought together a cross-section of the higher education community. President Habibullah and Dean Ansari from Balkh had attended that conference. One of the main topics discussed was the requirement that all teaching faculty in all Afghan universities must hold at least an M.Sc. degree. No specific time-frame has been set, but this means the university community in Afghanistan is faced with a huge faculty upgrading task. We discussed ways the NWFPAU – as well as other university contacts that Qayyum has in Pakistan – might assist in this faculty upgrading task. The Director was pleased to have this information and will stay in contact. An appointment was made with Deputy Minister to continue our discussions the next day.

Next we went to the Extension Department of the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation (MAI) to get the Minister's signature on the Grant Agreement that will sponsor 10 MAI staff for M.Sc. Study at the NWFPAU. We discovered that Dr. Fazel (Extension Director) was in Peshawar for medical reasons. This meant we had to do a lot of explaining to a lot of people, but the agreement eventually got to the Minister's desk and was signed. Allen Lines was helpful in this process. He is an Ohio State University Agricultural Economics Professor on loan to USDA and on short term assignment at the MAI. He is overseeing the disbursement of \$4.2 million that was generated from monetized commodities and transferred to the MAI.

Our team had an interesting discussion with Professor Lines and Habib Rahman, MAI Policy Advisor, on the "Centers of Excellence" concept being developed by the MAI. This consists of seven centers in various agro-eco zones, where university Faculties of Agriculture exists in close proximity to MAI operations/facilities for research, extension and demonstration. Most locations have already been selected, including Mazar-e-Sharif in Balkh Province.

Lines introduced us to Roger Carlson, a retired AID employee with 43 years of experience, who is on short term assignment as a Senior Advisor to MAI. We had an interesting conversation about various approaches to agricultural development in Afghanistan.

Our first afternoon appointment was at AID-Kabul to brief Education Office representatives Chris Shephard and Shahnaz Hakim on accomplishments during our six-day stay at Balkh University. To facilitate this process, we had prepared a four-page summary of activities completed there. That summary is attached.

Returned to the guest house for a late-afternoon meeting with three collaborating NEI staff who are stationed in Afghanistan. Myers and Russin were able to give them advice on their soybean production plans, as well as on marketing and processing this year's crop.

Thursday, September 21

First stop was at Kabul University to walk around the campus, see the main library and Faculty of Agriculture facilities, with classes in session and lots of activity. Stopped in Dean Mohsini's office for another informative chat before our 10:00am appointment at the Ministry of Higher Education to meet with Deputy Minister Suraya Paikan. We explained NWFPAU resources, as an approach to staff upgrading, given that all teaching faculty will be required to hold M.S. degrees. She stated a strong preference for M.S. programs that could be delivered primarily in Afghanistan, preferably at Kabul University, so that faculty from outlying provinces could take advantage of these programs. Whether a program can be developed that would meet her expectations will depend on discussions, research and information gathering within the NWFPAU/SIUC/UIUC consortium and then with Kabul University. This will prove to be a complex and protracted process, without any certainty of the desired result; so no promises were made. Finding the financial support for this type of M.S. program is yet another large challenge. The Deputy Minister suggested World Bank sources and gave us the name of a contact person, which turned out to be the same person that Oval and Qayyum have tried repeatedly to contact but have received absolutely zero response. This was nonetheless an informative meeting.

We drove through Darul Aman Research Station and then looked at the campus of the new American University-Kabul, then went to the airport for our flight back to Islamabad. Overnighted at the Marriott and prepared for departure early on September 22 for travel from Islamabad to London to Chicago and then to Champaign/Carbondale.

SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES
ALO (HED) BALKH UNIVERSITY AGRICULTURE FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

September 13 through September 19, 2006

Dr. John Russin
Dr. Oval Myers, Jr.
Dr. John Santas
Dr. Abdul Qayyum Khan

PRESENTATIONS: FACULTY AND COURSE DEVELOPMENT

Lectures

Two lectures were presented to the students and instructors of BUFA. On September 16th, Dr. John Russin presented a lecture on Plant Disease Identification and Control to an audience of some 200 individuals. He surveyed different types of plant pathogens, showed diagnostic symptoms and signs of plant diseases, and discussed strategies for control of plant diseases in field situations. On September 17th Dr. Oval Myers presented a lecture on Plant Genetic Resources to an audience of some 150 individuals. He discussed and demonstrated genetic variability in plants, illustrated methods for deploying this diversity, and addressed approaches for enhancing this diversity.

During both lectures, students and faculty were enthusiastic, attentive, and genuinely interested in the presented material. They engaged in vigorous and fruitful questions and answers, which stimulated follow-up discussions on practical applications of lecture topics, focusing on how best to implement the learned principles into Afghanistan agriculture.

Both lectures were held in an auditorium-style lecture room. While one lecture utilized a laptop computer, projector, and public address system, an electricity outage during the other lecture hampered somewhat student-lecturer interaction.

Clearly, consistent electrical infrastructure is critical for continued development of BUFA and their students.

Practical Field Experience

Following the lecture on September 17th, Dr. Oval Myers, Dr. John Russin and Mr. Mark Henning (JDA) led approximately 150 students for a practical field experience at the University demonstration farm. Group 1, led by Dr. Oval Myers visited a composite maize planting where he demonstrated variability with a single plant species, showed traits that were evident in the planting, and described strategy for selecting and improving lines from individual plants. Using melon, cotton, and soybean, Dr. John Russin led Group 2 on a demonstration of various plant disease symptoms, practiced the use of reference material for disease identification, and discussed aspects of cultural and chemical disease control. As a follow-up to the previous day lecture, several students brought samples of diseased melons. Dr. Russin then used these melons

to show the link between the melon fly, an insect, and melon decay. Students learned the importance of controlling this insect to ensure disease-free melon. Using seven different crops, Mr. Mark Henning led Group 3 on discussion of production strategies for these crops and presented practical information for developing integrated cropping systems that best suit Afghanistan agriculture.

In all cases, students were excited and energetic. They peppered presenters with many challenging questions, which allowed presenters to engage students thoroughly on the process of agricultural problem solving. Enthusiasm was contagious throughout the entire exercise.

Student Feedback

On September 18th, Dr. John Russin and Oval Myers met with some 50 agricultural students for a frank discussion of their perception of the program and suggestions for future strengthening. While the initial goal of this meeting was completion of student questionnaires, the majority of the time focused on student's thoughts and suggestions regarding BUFA.

As in all previous exercises students were articulate, enthusiastic, and optimistic. They spoke strongly in support of their professors. Their passion for learning, coupled with their intense desire to strengthen their experience using computer technology inspired Drs Russin and Myers greatly.

Further, these students showed a mature understanding not only of the current needs for their own education but also of the long-term needs for future generation of students. High on their lists of needs was a larger, stronger teaching faculty, followed closely by their acute needs for practical training and applied research experiences. While they did identify new buildings and a new campus as needs, these items interestingly were not atop their lists. A complete list of student assessment for BUFA strength and challenges follows:

Strengths

- All students want to learn (good learning environment)
- Good faculty relative, they perceive, to those at other Afghan Universities
- Generally friendly, supportive, encouraging professors

Challenges

- Teaching training
- More trained faculty
- Opportunity for practical training
 1. laboratory exercises, demonstration plant and animal farms, demonstration forests
- Improved modern curriculum
- Transportation to facilities listed above
- Larger, well equipped library
- Greater computer access for students
- Internet access

- Teaching and research equipment
- More class rooms
- New buildings, new campus

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

A Memorandum of Understanding was signed by Balkh University formally linking them with the implementers of the current project, i.e., Southern Illinois University Carbondale, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the Northwest Frontier Province Agricultural University at Peshawar, Pakistan. It is anticipated that a formal agreement will increase the likelihood of our attracting additional resources to continue improvement of the Faculty of Agriculture at Balkh University (BUFA).

The setting for the agreement signing ceremony is worthy of mention. A group of forty had gathered for dinner at the Kefayat Hotel. Half were faculty and staff and half were students from the Faculty of Agriculture. The teaching staff had selected and invited their most outstanding students. The after-dinner program, which included the signing ceremony, was video-taped by a University representative. Vice President Hashimi signed on behalf of President Habibullah, who had not returned from attending an all Afghanistan Universities conference in Kabul. During dinner and the rest of the evening, students and faculty mingled. It was clear that the faculty were proud of their students and it was indeed fortunate that the students could be included in this event, making them feel part of this University's linkage. After the program ended several students stayed to talk informally with members of our team on a wide range of topics.

INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

During our April 2006 visit we assisted the BUFA to develop and furnish a computer room, which could serve not only that function but also serve as a class preparation and meeting room for Department meetings. We found that room had been further furnished with two large bulletin boards for displaying student activities, a topographical map of Afghanistan. Discussions with individual members of the faculty indicated the room was being used for the intended purposes.

We purchased locally four additional desktop computers, two printers, two voltage stabilizers, and printing supplies. We also left an additional laptop computer and LCD projector, which had been purchased in the US. This brings the total of computers provided by the project to eight desktop and four laptops together with three printers and three LCD projectors. Thus, with the current space situation, the BUFA professors have, we feel, an adequate number of computers. However, they currently have no Internet access. There is also no regular student access to computers or the Internet although they do take a computer class as part of their curriculum.

We were also pleased to see that some books were in the bookcase in the computer room and that two bookcases had been constructed in the BUFA's combined lab and library on another floor. Good usage of the books remains problematic as they have not devised as yet an adequate checkout and return system.

We were told that Balkh University has been given greater control, but not ownership, of the main building, which is leading to partitioning the large main floor entry way and adding another classroom. Space remains a major problem with a growing student body.

General Observations

The faculty will need to progress rapidly in their development to keep up with students who are aggressive in demanding a quality practical as well as theoretical education.

The dramatic increase in student number from 200 students in 2003 to 600 students in 2006 has overwhelmed both the class room facilities and the faculty whose number remains at fifteen. This problem will be further compounded as current faculty members temporarily leave the BUFA to obtain a Masters Degree.

The extent of the teaching resources provided by donors over several years is not fully known. For example, laboratories are used as storage for equipment, books, and other supplies, some of which remained uncrated. They will need assistance in identifying those items which can be used in their teaching programs and in learning how to use them. Such training could be in the form of short workshops.

Our visits and discussions with BUFA suggest strongly that they, at present, are not capable of cataloguing and marshalling their present teaching resources into a practical education experience for their students. In this area the assistance of an outside agency is greatly needed. Experienced outside faculty may be required to catalyze this effort, which should not only yield the beginning of a practical education but also form a foundation for needed expansion and improvement in the future.

The greatest accomplishment of this small but important project has been to enable both BUFA and outside faculty to adequately assess the immediate and long-term needs. Our targeted consultants approach used during this project has proven effective in identifying of needs and suggesting possible solutions and creating awareness for both BUFA and the external consultants and the donor agency. The future needs are to expand this targeted approach to allow longer periods of consultancies so that the identified needs can be met and evolving needs can be addressed.