President Hamid Karzai Discusses Transition and Reconstruction in Afghanistan

BY KATHERINE MOORE

Addressing the packed room of students, faculty and guests, His Excellency Hamid Karzai, president of the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan, began his keynote address on the lighter side. Noting his pleasure in being back in an academic environment, he surveyed the room with a smile. "Many of us when we are young and in school, we dream of the day when we stand in the place where our teachers stand...some of us fulfill [our dreams] and others fail and become presidents."

As the audience burst into laughter, it was clear to everyone at the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) event that this was a global leader facing daunting tasks and tremendous odds—rebuilding post-war, post-Taliban Afghanistan.

President Karzai was at Columbia as part of a week-long world affairs program held in conjunction with the annual United Nations General Assembly meetings. With other senior leaders from Afghanistan, he participated in a half-day conference sponsored by SIPA’s Center for International Conflict Resolution. Columbia senior fellow Senator George Mitchell hosted the event, which drew senior leaders from the Afghan government, including Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, UN Special Representative and guardian of the Bonn Agreement Lakhdr Bahwin as well as high-level U.S. government officials.

"The story of Afghanistan is a long, long [one] with lots of sadness and pain for the Afghan people," said the extremely charismatic and articulate Karzai, in opening the conference. "[I only hope] to turn that sad page of Afghan history into what we would consider a happy page for the younger generation...we are beginning to plant the seeds of a rosy future."

President Karzai is well aware of the challenges facing a country still addressing the vestiges of widespread conflict. (Two years ago) we had nothing," stated the president. "Our institutions were destroyed, our educational system was destroyed, our infrastructure was destroyed, our people were tortured." The country’s progress since then has been remarkable, Karzai told the audience as he outlined the political process which led to the Bonn Agreement and the establishment of an interim authority. Karzai listed the important steps in nation-building, including work on establishing a viable police force, a national army, a judiciary structure and an educational and healthcare system. "We have a nation, a formidable nation," said Karzai. "But we must create the state machinery."

"Afghanistan is like a powerful engine that has bad wheels, and it will bring four to five billion dollars into the country." His priorities are numerous and slightly overwhelming. They include education for the country’s young people, and salaries for teachers, as well as "fighting narcotics which go ‘hand-in-hand’ with terrorism." Indeed, Karzai noted that Afghans still have extremism coming toward us.

He discussed the efforts of the international community and Afghanistan to combat terrorism activities and secure the country. "Afghanistan will need years to recover from all its ills," concluded President Karzai. "It will take years to stand on its own two feet, to feed itself, to defend itself, to educate itself. Until then, we will need the assistance of the world community, and the world community means [everyone] from governments to universities."

He told the audience that a draft constitution would be presented to the Afghan people over the next two weeks. After the constitution is ratified, the president expects a six-month window to prepare for democracy and a "more representative government."

President Karzai also discussed what he called the "massive problem of the economy." "Afghanistan is a land-bridging country," a theme he addressed in his address earlier to the U.N. General Assembly. Karzai suggested that just as political institutions must be established in his country, so too must there be "physical reconstruction," which he sees as key to a stronger nation over the long-term. Trade and investment are crucial and Afghanistan, he stated has "just passed a [Central] bank law." We have registered 4,500 new investment projects, and if all these projects are real- ized—and implemented [they] will bring four to five billion dollars into the country.

Bollinger Moderates Discussion with Southeastern European Leaders

Columbia hosted a roundtable discussion with foreign ministers of the countries of Southeastern Europe attending the UN General Assembly, including: Mladen Ivanić, Foreign Minister of Bosnia-Hercegovina; Tassos Giannitsis, Alternate Foreign Minister of Greece; Mircea Dan Cavos, Foreign Minister of Romania; Goran Svilanovic, Foreign Minister of Serbia-Montenegro and Dimitrij Rapel, Foreign Minister of Slovenia.

President Lee C. Bollinger moderated the discussion, which focused on the leaders’ visions for a new Southeastern Europe. Among the topics discussed were actions to further Balkan integration into European and trans-Atlantic political, economic and security structures, as well as Greek EU presidency plans for prioritizing the integration of Southeastern Europe. Leaders also debated how the war in Iraq appeared to derail these plans, and next steps for the region. Columbia University’s Harriman Institute/East Central European Center at the School for International and Public Affairs sponsored the roundtable.