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The international community's errors could destabilize Afghanistan

International conference of experts in Bonn identifies crucial issues / appeal to the international community to reconsider election date / re-establishing nationwide security within Afghanistan precondition for development

Bonn, June 3 2003- "**Lessons that should have been learned, obviously haven't been learned**", concluded **James Putzel** of the London School of Economics at an international symposium on Afghanistan in Bonn this weekend (May 30 until June 1). The conference, titled "*State Reconstruction and International Engagement in Afghanistan*", was hosted by the Center for Development Research (ZEF) of Bonn University in cooperation with the Crisis States Programme of the London School of Economics.

Conrad Schetter of ZEF, stated that "in contrast to other meetings on Afghanistan, this was the first attempt since the collapse of the Taliban regime, to bring together the most renowned international researchers and experts to discuss essential issues from an academic point of view".

What are the lessons to be learned according to the participants?

"The international community is failing to address meaningfully the widening security gap, which is hampering the reform process outlined in the Bonn agreement and which is the basis for establishing and maintaining peace and stability in Afghanistan", stated **Barbara Stapleton**, of ACBAR, a NGO located in Kabul. Referring to the dominant position of warlords and the dramatic deterioration of the security situation over recent months, she pointed out that "**there will be no development without security**".

Jonathan Goodhand of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, warned that if the international community does not provide **sufficient financial aid**, and does

not take care of a proper **distribution** of goods throughout Afghanistan and not only within the central region, it might strengthen the warlords and the **war economy**, including boosting opium production. "The revenues from the cultivation of opium exceed the total amount of international aid by far", he added.

Jim Boyce, from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, said donors should do more to promote fiscal reconstruction, perhaps beginning by having their own personnel pay local taxes when stationed in countries like Afghanistan.

Also, many participants were concerned about the elections, scheduled for summer 2004. **William Maley** of the University of Canberra, Australia, explained that “without providing the necessary logistical framework and the necessary resources, free and fair elections that conform to international standards cannot be guaranteed”. The participants stated that if elections are held too early – even before warfare is brought to a conclusion -, they could destabilise the country even more, ultimately making a stable and more democratic Afghanistan a more distant prospect. Many felt **elections might be used as a pretext for a quick withdrawal of international support**.

Another appeal to the international community was expressed by **Patricia Gossman** of the Afghanistan Justice Project in Kabul. She pointed out that the **legacy of the war and the issue of impunity** could only be tackled with international assistance. “Impunity can’t last forever”, Gossman said, “it is important, that a national reconciliation process addressing these sensitive questions is starting now, since this is what the Afghan people ask for”.

Those attending the conference criticized the fact that **legal and political reforms, are often initiated without having a profound knowledge of the local context**. Those doing scientific research on the complex problems facing countries like Afghanistan need to channel their findings to policy makers. **James Putzel** said: “Maybe, in this way we can avoid committing the same errors time and time again all over the world”. So concluded an intensive and fruitful debate on the future of Afghanistan.