Transportation And Telecommunications In Afghanistan

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Overview: Afghanistan's transportation system, which prior to 1979 was rudimentary except for a modern system of main roads, suffered severe damage during the ensuing two decades. In the post-2001 era, the weak transportation infrastructure has been a major deterrent to realizing Afghanistan's potential as a regional commercial crossroads. The road system, which provides the only transport in most parts of the country, has been an urgent reconstruction project. Some 79 percent of public transport expenditures for the period 2005–11 are earmarked for road improvement. No rail system exists.

After suffering damage to most airports during the wars, the air transport system has been reviving in the early 2000s. Because landlocked Afghanistan has been very dependent on routes through Pakistan, with which relations have been tense, a top priority is diversifying Afghanistan's access to seaports and to new markets in India by making new bilateral transportation agreements.

Roads: The main internal road system that was built in the 1960s included about 2,000 kilometers of roads. After an intensive international road-building and restoration effort, in 2008 Afghanistan had an estimated 13,100 kilometers of paved roads. However, even in Kabul the condition of many roads still was poor in 2008 as reconstruction lagged. Heavily damaged in the 1980s and 1990s, the main arteries connect the cities of Ghazni, Herat, Kabul, and Kandahar with roads crossing the Pakistan border.

Critical commercial and military roadways through the Salang and Tang-e Gharu Mountain passes, north and east of Kabul, respectively, were badly damaged during the Soviet occupation and ensuing conflicts. As of 2008, some parts of the so-called Ring Road network, which would link most population and commercial centers, had been completed. That includes a highway connecting Kabul with Kandahar, but a connector between Kandahar and Herat, begun in 2004, was not yet complete in 2008. Germany is financing a road connecting Jalalabad with the Pakistan border. India, Iran, and Pakistan are constructing roads connecting Afghanistan with their respective national road systems.

One such route is to connect Iran's port of Chabahar on the Gulf of Oman with Tajikistan via Afghanistan. Provincial roads, which also received heavy damage during conflicts of recent decades, generally have not been repaired since the end of hostilities.

Railroads: In 2008, Afghanistan had no functioning railroads. For a variety of geopolitical and practical reasons, numerous plans for a trans-Afghan line failed to materialize in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Only five short domestic lines were built, including one line passing across the Friendship Bridge into Uzbekistan. Otherwise, lines built toward Afghanistan by surrounding countries stopped at the border.

In the early 2000s, road building was a much higher priority of infrastructure restoration than railroad building. Only US$100,000 of public transport funding for the period 2005–11 was earmarked for railroad construction. In 2006 plans called for five new freight dispatch stations along the borders to link domestic roads with rail lines from neighboring countries. In 2008, construction was underway on a 189-kilometer rail line linking Herat with the east Iranian town of Sangan.

Ports: Afghanistan is landlocked; the main ports along its chief waterway, the Amu Darya River, are Kheyrabad and Shir Khan.

Inland Waterways: The most important inland waterway is the Amu Darya River, whose 800 kilometers along Afghanistan's border can accommodate vessels up to 500 deadweight tons.

Civil Aviation and Airports: In 2007, some 46 airports were in operation; 12 had paved runways, but only four had runways longer than 3,000 meters. Nine heliports also were in operation. In 2006 Kabul International Airport, the only destination for international flights into Afghanistan began a major reconstruction project with Japanese aid. Its new international terminal was to be operational in late 2008.

Also in late 2008, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)–led International Security Assistance Force was scheduled to begin turning over air traffic control at Kabul International to civilian operators. Connections to Kabul are made via Delhi, India; Islamabad, Pakistan; and Baku, Azerbaijan. Airports at Herat, Jalalabad, and Mazar-e Sharif also were renovated in the early 2000s. The military conflicts of 1979–2001 destroyed many of the aircraft of the national line, Ariana, and damaged most of the civilian airports. In 2004, Ariana began regular flights to Delhi, Dubai, Frankfurt, Islamabad, Istanbul, and Moscow.

In 2003 Afghanistan's first private airline, Kam Air, began flights. However, in 2005 both Ariana and Kam air were banned in airports of the European Union because of poor safety standards. In 2008 Ariana's fleet included eight airliners; delivery of four more was scheduled for 2009. Beginning in 2002, Afghanistan's civilian aviation has received substantial foreign assistance; India has trained flight staff and contributed three Airbuses.

Pipelines: In 2007 Afghanistan had 466 kilometers of natural gas pipelines.

Telecommunications: In 2004, Afghanistan had an estimated 50,000 main telephone lines and 600,000 cellular phones. Mobile phones, introduced to Afghanistan in 2001, became the principal means of communication in the early 2000s, as expansion of landline services virtually stopped. In 2006 an estimated 3.2 million mobile phone subscriptions were active.

By 2008, four mobile phone companies were in operation. Plans call for establishment of a unified countrywide mobile phone network based on code division multiple access technology, in cooperation with

U.S. and Chinese companies. The number of Afghans with Internet access increased rapidly between 2000 and 2008, multiplying from an estimated 1,000 to 580,000. Public Internet facilities are available in Herat, Kabul, Kandahar, and Mazar-e Sharif. In many areas, however, unpredictable power cuts hinder Internet access.

Sources: http:www.loc.gov