

Future Harvest Centers to replace looted secret Afghan seed supply

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G. Hawtin/IFPRI

A secret stockpile of hundreds of samples of Afghan crops assembled during the years of Taliban rule has been destroyed. In August 2002 agricultural researchers reported that looters had ruined the collection. Ironically, the looters' target was not seed, but the small, airtight plastic containers used to protect seed samples from humidity and insects. These find a ready use to store all sorts of things that the looters consider more valuable than seeds. Now five Future Harvest Centers are responding by restoring hundreds of varieties originally collected in Afghanistan.

Dr Nassrat Wassimi, advisor to the United Nations Food

Afghani farmers, like this man encountered in the mountainous North during a collecting mission in the 1970s, will be getting back their crop varieties despite the destruction of two collections in Afghanistan.

and Agriculture Organization's mission in Afghanistan, assembled the secret collection in 1995 and hid it in the northern city of Ghazni. Wassimi is currently the coordinator of the Future Harvest Coalition to Rebuild Agriculture in Afghanistan, a US\$12 million project sponsored by the United States Agency for International Development (see p. 33). He notes that this is the second time that key food crop collections in Afghanistan have been destroyed. It was after the destruction of the national

genebank in the early 1990s that Wassimi started to re-collect samples of the country's major crops, including numerous fruits, nuts and pasture species. Afghanistan is a major centre of genetic diversity and its native species are highly prized by plant breeders.

In response to the war, and helping to make good the loss of the collection, scientists are now preparing to restore hundreds of crop samples collected in Afghanistan from the 1920s to the 1970s. These samples have been kept in Future Harvest genebanks in India, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru and Syria.

The objective is to re-establish the national collection, thereby making available to farmers, and scientists as complete a cross-section of the nation's genetic diversity as can be assembled from external sources. Priority crops include wheat, barley, potato, lentil, chickpeas as well as scores of pasture crops and numerous wild relatives.



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"The Future Harvest Centers act as international custodians for more than 600,000 different food crop samples," said Geoff Hawtin, Director General of the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute. "Cases like Afghanistan are one reason why collecting and conserving plant genetic diversity is so important." Hawtin knows that lesson

from first-hand experience. In the mid-1970s he participated in a series of expeditions in Afghanistan that collected hundreds of the crop samples now safeguarded in genebanks. These samples will soon be on their way home.

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**Did Farmers Eat Their Seeds?**

When the international development community returned to Afghanistan following the departure of the Taliban, agricultural experts feared that after three years of drought, Afghani farmers had either lost or eaten the seed they normally save for planting.

What they found reinforced previous observations in post-war Rwanda and Somalia. Most farmers in the southern part of the country who had access to some irrigation managed to save some seed. "Even farmers in the north, who faced much more desperate conditions managed to save small amounts of seed for planting," reports Tony van Gastel, a seed expert at ICARDA, the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas, based in Syria.

Much of that seed is now being grown under contract to the Coalition to Rebuild Agriculture and will be offered to other farmers for planting in September. And the conclusion—that farmers generally refrain from eating all their seed even under the direst of circumstances—will

have significant implications for the planning and execution of future agricultural restoration efforts in countries disrupted by war and other crises.

Wheat, as grown in the mountains of Afghanistan, is a very diverse crop that has long been of interest to collectors.