

Consortium Targets Afghan Agricultural Revival

By Steven van Krimpen

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 14 (IPS) - A consortium of research institutes and aid groups launched Thursday a multi-million dollar effort to revive agriculture in war- and drought-ravaged Afghanistan. The consortium, formed under the aegis of the international network Future Harvest, said it hoped to help Afghanistan's farmers meet the bulk of the country's food needs within five years through such steps as replenishing damaged seed and irrigation systems. "There is an urgent need to focus not only on the long-term rebuilding process, but also on the near-term requirements of farmers for basic food consumption and nutrition," said Adel El-Beltagy, director general of the Syria-based International Centre for Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA).

According to the U.N. World Food Programme (WFP), about 85 percent of Afghanistan's 24 million inhabitants are directly dependent on agriculture. Their crops have been ruined by drought and 23 years of conflict. A Red Cross-Red Crescent assessment mission just returned from Afghanistan reports that poverty in western Afghanistan is especially shocking. The team heard how girls as young as ten are being offered for marriage in exchange for bags of flour in a desperate struggle for survival in parts of Herat and Farah provinces. In many of the villages, there was no agricultural activity because of the drought and no seeds were available for planting. Much of the livestock had either died or been sold off. "We saw children digging in the fields for roots to eat and use as firewood. Leaves from the

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rees were also being eaten," said John Watt, operations manager at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent societies.

The Future Harvest Consortium to Rebuild Agriculture in Afghanistan plans to provide farmers with seeds to plant for the upcoming spring and fall growing seasons and vaccines to prevent livestock diseases. It has raised an initial 12 million dollars for its efforts. The goal for replenishment is 125,000 tons of seed, which experts hope to reach in three years. The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and international aid agencies say they have begun producing seed in Afghanistan. This year, approximately 3,500 tons of seed will be made available in the spring and about another 10,000 tons in the fall. "What we plan to do," John Dodds of ICARDA said, "is provide the necessary scientific support needed to produce quality seed of adapted varieties inside Afghanistan." He pointed out that if the focus is kept on seed production, then food aid programmes could gradually phase out their operations over the next few years. It will be essential to phase out food aid while farming activities increase so that aid supplies do not distort markets, he added.

Two other factors will be key. First, irrigation systems need to be repaired. The immediate task will be to collect reliable baseline information on what currently exists to help prioritise repair of small irrigation schemes. Second, given the Afghan interim administration's commitment to eradicating poppy cultivation, "Afghanistan will need to move quickly to provide farmers sound alternatives to displace poppies," said Dodds. "Fast-growing fruits and vegetables, like carrots and melons, are a good way to do that because they can be grown quickly and command a higher return than most other food crops." "We need to make sure that recovery efforts are based on a real understanding of Afghan agriculture so that they meet the real needs of affected communities. Science-led recovery efforts, supported by grass-roots level interventions, will rapidly put the country's agriculture on the road to recovery," said Avtar Kaul, a senior technical adviser with the non-governmental relief group CARE. A needs assessment report by the Asian Development Bank, U.N. Development Programme, and World Bank estimates that 11.4 to 18.1 billion dollars will be needed to rebuild Afghanistan. At a conference in Tokyo last month, donor countries and agencies pledged an initial 4.5 billion dollars.