

Helping Afghanistan restart its agriculture fields

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WASHINGTON - International rescue groups and food scientists are launching their most aggressive campaign ever to try and revive Afghanistan's agricultural base, laid waste by a devastating three-year drought and 20 years of foreign invasions and civil wars.

John Dodds, assistant director general of the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas, an international organization that helps arid regions of the world, said the extent of damage to Afghanistan's farms and livestock is so great that it will take at least 15 years of peace to bring Afghanistan's agriculture back into full production.

"I've never seen anything quite like this," said Dodds, who previously worked on bringing back agriculture in war-torn Haiti and several African countries. The center also is working on farming issues in several of the formerly Soviet Asian republics.

Afghanistan was self-sufficient before the civil wars erupted in the 1970s, and was an exporter of some fruits that were prized in neighboring countries.

But the fighting has destroyed the country's irrigation systems, killed off a generation of farmers and left Afghanistan with a disproportionately high number of farms headed by widows. About half of the country's livestock was lost in the conflict, and the fighting combined with the drought devastated half of Afghanistan's farms.

Complicating matters is that the national gene bank, which stored seeds and plants, was blown up during fighting in Kabul in 1992. Horticulturalists believe Afghanistan is the region where chickpeas and pistachios originated, and seed-gene banks are vital to bringing back crops that are acclimatized to the region.

Dodds said international groups have been trying to reassemble the gene bank from seeds taken away for study before the civil war erupted, and other scientists collected after the Kabul center was destroyed.

Some \$12 million has already been pledged through a United Nations program to begin repatriating the seeds next month, when spring planting begins.

It is expected to be a slow recovery, even if precarious hopes for a return to peace prevail, and the drought ends. The program is aimed at making Afghanistan self-sufficient in agriculture by 2006 or 2007, but it may take several years more to fully restore the country's irrigation system, which feeds half of the country's 16 million acres of arable lands. The United Nations estimates that could take \$1 billion, and involve construction projects for the next 10 to 15 years.

Dodds said the success of the program depends on forces that neither he nor agricultural scientists can control. "After a three-year drought, it's got to the point where there has to be rain," he said.

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