



**Seeds of change:** Researchers Tosh Narzullov, Ken Street and Russian translator Sergey Shuvalov examine seeds of an antique crop in the Badakhshan region close to the Afghan border.

## Ancient grain boosts Australian crops

■ By Peter Trott

DODGING land mines and climbing snow-clad mountain passes is not the usual work of plant breeders.

But with an estimated \$13.7 million annual boost to Australia's grain harvest resulting from new genetic material, the effort is worth it, according to researcher Ken Street.

The Syrian-based Australian has just completed a mission into areas along the Afghanistan bor-

der collecting strains of wheat and other grains which have been grown in the harsh landscape for thousands of years.

He said farmers relied on improved varieties to boost yield and resist damage by disease and insects.

Dr Street said Tajikistan proved a treasure trove of local crop varieties and their wild relatives. But the work was a race against time before some of the unique strains became extinct through over-grazing and population pressure.

He said people in the area lived close to the land and their survival depended on the success of each crop.

"By planting mixtures of hardy local varieties, they are at least ensured of a harvest," he said.

The mixtures of wheat, legumes and forage were planted by hand, harvested and cooked up as a staple gruel.

The latest trip by an international team of scientists collected 400 seed samples which will be distributed free to Australian and other breeders.