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Despite billions in aid, Afghans can't find work

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Hundreds of men, some on crutches, all wearing tattered clothing, gather shortly before dawn at major intersections throughout Kabul and other Afghan cities. Displaying primitive tools such as a level or a trowel, they seek labor that is often backbreaking, always temporary and will earn just a few dollars for a day's work.

Employers circle the intersections, eyeing the crowds. Usually they are looking for one or two workers for minor construction tasks. Before they even stop, dozens of men swarm their vehicle, fighting with each other to get one of perhaps five or six jobs available that morning.

Despite billions of dollars from abroad to develop this impoverished country since the U.S.-led invasion toppled the Taliban regime in 2001, roughly 12 million people, or eight out of every 10

working-age Afghan are unskilled day laborers, according to an International Labor Organization report. Most land only temporary jobs.

In rural areas, work is also temporary but it's also seasonal and often illegal, the report said. Some of the biggest employers, opium-producing poppy farmers, provide tens of thousands of short-term jobs.

But almost everywhere, the pay is meager. Afghans with jobs, whether part-time or full-time, earn on average \$410 per year or about \$1 per day, according to the World Bank.

Mir Afghan, a day laborer standing on line one recent morning at a Kabul intersection, says he hasn't worked in 13 days and is \$1,260 in debt. He said neighbors occasionally help him out and local stores give him food on credit. One neighbor recently loaned him \$9 to buy medicine for one of his six children.

At Mir Afghan's home in a congested neighborhood on the edge of Kabul, his wife, Sabar Gul, started crying when asked about the family's meals. Cradling her coughing and feverish infant son in her arms, she said she has enough food to cook only one meal each day and they rarely can afford to eat meat.

The International Labor Organization report, released last year, offered several grim statistics: nearly half of Afghans don't have enough to eat; 18 percent of children under 15 years old are working; and 82 percent of Afghans are illiterate.

Most businesses are not registered and thus do not pay taxes. That means the government, riddled with corrupt officials, is heavily dependent on international aid as well as on the black market most often linked to the country's flourishing drug trade.

Ten years ago the International Labor Organization warned that long-term stability and prosperity would elude Afghanistan if employment, the kind that guarantees a regular income, wasn't made a key component of projects to reconstruct this war-ravaged country.

But aid organizations were reluctant to get involved in job creation, the private sector remained stagnant despite significant investment in telecommunications, and many wealthy Afghans chose to put their money in other countries.

Nowadays, the report said, most Afghans cannot find permanent work, and even temporary work is drying up as international aid money dwindles ahead of the 2014 deadline for the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO combat troops from Afghanistan.

"There is a serious looming problem with unemployment in Afghanistan," said Graeme Smith, senior Afghanistan analyst for the Brussels-based International Crisis Group. "Ordinary workers have depended heavily on construction, trucking and other sectors that saw boom times because of the presence of foreign troops and aid projects and there's likely a coming bust, as soldiers withdraw and development budgets shrink," he said. "This could badly affect stability and security."

A day laborer works two, maybe three days a week, said Maroof Qaderi, president of the National Union of Afghanistan Workers, Employees. They are often heavily indebted to banks, family and friends.

To pay his bills, Mir Afghan has taken his oldest son, Mohammad, out of school and put him to work making carpets and doing odd jobs.

But Mohammed, a lean 19-year-old, says he keeps up his studies at night. "I don't want my life to be the shovel. I want to finish high school, and go to a government college to study economics," he said.

For the past several mornings, several university students have mingled among the scores of men, including Mir Afghan, looking for work at the intersection in Koti Sangi, a district in the heart of the Afghan capital.

Waheedullah, 22, says his family has only enough money to pay for his attending classes part-time, and he's worried he won't be able to finish his studies. He gets up at 4:30 a.m. to bicycle to Koti Sangi, where he hopes to find a couple of days of work.

Waheedullah, who uses just one name, blamed the weak economy on rampant corruption, saying Afghan officials and their foreign partners have siphoned off most of the money that's come to Afghanistan.

"Foreigners came here to make jobs for themselves, but nothing has changed for the lives of Afghans," he said. "I think Afghanistan is going in a very bad direction. No one is doing anything about the problems of the poor people."

Khwaja Tamim, a house painter who said he's come to Koti Sangi every morning for the last six years, says jobs are dwindling as people expect the worst after the final withdrawal next year of U.S. and NATO combat forces.

"People are scared," he said, noting "the suicide attackers, the jobless, the criminal gangs and always the rumors between Afghans."

On Monday a car bomb exploded at Koti Sangi, killing the driver and creating a stampede as workers ran for safety.

Police were unsure whether militants or criminal gangs were behind the bombing.

"From one second to the next you don't know what can happen, whether a bomb goes off right here and our lives are finished," Tamim said one day earlier in an interview at Koti Sangi.

"I have experience of the civil war," he said, referring to the period when rival mujahedeen groups who forced the Russians out of Afghanistan turned their guns on each other, killing as many as 50,000 civilians before the Taliban took power in 1996.

"I think the future will be worse than the civil war."