

**From:** Khetab, Mohammad Wais -KABUL -GR **Sent:** August-26-18 10:32 AM **To:** EXTOTT (OAA) **Subject:** KBGR18-080: **KABUL Puts Climate Change in the Spotlight**

## **SUMMARY**

KABUL recently organized a series of well-received lectures and outreach that have materially raised awareness and interest in climate change and provoked important early steps towards development of a sustained local focus and action on such issues. Working in close partnership with the Afghan government, academic, media and international community partners, KABUL spearheaded development of an extensive outreach program on climate change that featured eminent Canadian scientist, Dr. Karim-Aly Kassam, International Professor of Environmental and Indigenous Studies at Cornell University. Audiences included students, academics, business persons, Afghan government officials and members of the diplomatic community. Drawing on a decade of fieldwork in Afghanistan and central Asia, Dr. Kassam proved himself a highly engaging speaker with messages that Afghan audiences found intuitive and compelling. The program confirmed a huge appetite among Afghans for more understanding of climate change, its impacts on Afghanistan, and strategies for dealing with it. One concrete outcome of the Kassam visit is establishment of a post within the Afghan President's office to act as a focal point and catalyst for more concerted and consistent study and action on climate by the Afghan government. For Canada and other donors, ways to help sustain and nurture this interest should be considered.

## **REPORT**

**2. Afghan Context:** After four decades of almost constant conflict and political upheaval, it is not surprising that Afghanistan remains one of the most underdeveloped and aid dependent countries in the world. Problems of unemployment, illiteracy, disease, poverty and poor access to health and education are compounded by a very active conflict affecting almost all parts of the country. For many Afghans, life is a daily struggle for food, shelter and other basics. With so many acute problems, the implications and impact of climate change are not widely known and not often part of the Afghan public discourse. Yet, as a recent series of lectures and outreach organized by KABUL confirmed, climate change is already a visible force in Afghanistan and one that is likely to have increasingly severe impacts. For a nation still largely dependent on agriculture as an economic mainstay, the importance of awareness of and early action on climate change cannot be overstated.

**3. 2016 Program:** Dr. Karim-Aly Kassam, is an eminent Canadian scientist who currently holds International Professorship of Environmental and Indigenous Studies at Cornell University. KABUL previously worked with Dr. Kassam on a shorter program of lectures delivered at this embassy in early 2016. With over a decade of experience conducting field research and study on climate change and the adaptive capacity of indigenous communities in the Pamir Mountains of central Asia (including in Afghanistan), Dr Kassam's polished presentation and ability to cite results and insights obtained in Afghanistan and neighboring countries gave his lectures immediacy and pertinence that Afghan audiences found relevant to their own experiences and reality. Moreover, Afghans were impressed to find that not only was their country and region worthy subject of study, but also that it was yielding new and original knowledge. For a people used to depending on contributions from abroad, the message that their nation had something of value to give back to the rest of the world was novel and inspirational. Not surprisingly, one success of the 2016 Kassam program was that it confirmed a huge appetite among Afghan students, scholars and officials to learn more about climate change, especially its effects and implications for Afghanistan. Unfortunately, a planned return engagement for Kassam in Kabul in June 2017 was disrupted by a major terrorist attack in late May, involving a massive truck bomb that killed at least 150 and resulted in significant damage

to a number of embassies, including the Canadian Embassy. Though a year was required to put the program back on track, it is a testament to Dr. Kassam's dedication that he remained steadfast in his resolve to help Afghans in their battle with climate change.

**4. Timing:** Dr. Kassam's 2nd lecture and outreach program in Kabul took place over three days (24 – 26 June 2018). His visit was timely, coming on the heels of his participation in a "High Level UN Conference on Water for Sustainable Development" held in Dushanbe, Tajikistan the week before. Through the efforts of KABUL and ASTANA, Kassam was part of a Canadian delegation to that conference where issues of water usage were examined in the context of climate change and sustainable development. Coincidentally, parts of northern and western Afghanistan have experienced (and continue to experience) a severe and prolonged drought in 2018 that continues to result in significant dislocation and hardship for affected Afghans. Indeed, concerns have been expressed recently that, at least in western Afghanistan, drought and scarce water resources may increasingly be a contributing driver to the conflict in that region.

**5. Media Interviews** - On June 24, Dr. Kassam had an opportunity to talk to local media about his research work and findings about climate change in Afghanistan and its region. He held three separate exclusive interviews with Zan TV, Khurshid TV and the Salam Watandar radio network (the mostly widely listened to radio network in Afghanistan). During the interviews, Kassam explained the nature and methodology of his research work (much of it conducted in Afghanistan), the impact of climate change and the capacity of indigenous communities in overcoming environmental challenges. He called on the Afghan government to prioritize the issue of climate change as its impact could severely affect food security and water systems in Afghan communities, leading to increased poverty. He added that another important impact would be the increase of water levels in rivers and lakes due to more rapid snow and glacial melt and increased intensity of rainfalls in spring, which can cause frequent flooding, avalanches and rockslides. Meantime, shifting rainfall patterns may cause drought and insufficient replenishment of water tables and reservoirs in other areas. He noted that the impact of climate change may already be visible in the severe drought currently affecting several Afghan provinces. Dr. Kassam warned that climate change could also have disproportionate impact and result in increased burden on Afghan women, particularly rural women who play a major role in the agricultural and pastoral/herding sectors.



**Figure 1: Dr. Kassam speaks to media**

**6. Talk and Reception at the Embassy:** On the evening of June 24, KABUL hosted a presentation by Dr. Kassam on “Addressing Climate Change through Ecological Calendars and Peaceful Pluralism: Lessons from Afghanistan and Central Asia”. Audience members included participants from the Afghan government, the diplomatic community, and NGOs. KABUL Chargé Lupul made welcoming remarks followed by introductory remarks by Hamid Helmandi, Chief Advisor to the Afghan President on Agriculture and Development Issues. Hamidi noted the importance of the topic and spoke to some problems already affecting Afghanistan that he believed were evidence of climate change. Noting a lack of expertise and capacity in Afghanistan on climate matters, Hamidi expressed his appreciation to KABUL for arranging the visit of Dr. Kassam and the important opportunity it represented for raising awareness on environmental issues among Afghan officials and the public. Hamidi then provided a brief overview of the Afghan government’s existing programs for protecting the environment and some of the environmental challenges already identified. Dr. Kassam’s presentation was wide ranging and included themes touching on climate change impacts (including on health security) and the benefits of pluralism and plant biodiversity. The presentation was followed by a reception that provided a valuable networking opportunity for participants.





**Figure 2: Presidential Advisor Helmandi makes opening remarks**

**Figure 3: Dr. Kassam speaks to audience at the Embassy**

**7. Symposium on Climate Change and Food Security:** The following day (June 25), Afghanistan’s President’s Office hosted a full day symposium on climate change and food security that was designed and led by Dr. Kassam. Besides 56 senior government officials, participants included staff from USAID and KABUL’s Development Program. In his opening remarks, Presidential Advisor Helmandi spoke highly of Dr. Kassam’s commitment to Afghanistan as demonstrated through his lengthy history of research in the country and region. He added appreciatively that through his focus on the resilience of indigenous communities, Kassam had brought a new human and cultural flavor to the understanding of climate change. Describing climate change as a very real and major challenge for Afghanistan, Hamidi announced that President Ashraf Ghani had directed establishment of a special unit in the President’s Office to focus on combating climate change. Dr. Kassam then opened the morning session of the Symposium with a lecture and presentation on “The Role of Diversity and Pluralism in Achieving Food Security: The Untold Story of Afghanistan”. In the afternoon session, he provided a second presentation entitled “Building Adaptive Capacity for Climate Change: The Potential of Ecological Calendars in Afghanistan”. Through the lectures, Dr. Kassam underscored the size of challenge presented by climate change, but urged participants to recognize that Afghanistan’s diversity could be a great asset in dealing with it. By encouraging peaceful pluralism and recognition of diversity as a wellspring for useful capabilities and resources, Afghan communities could maximize the tools available to them for reducing and overcoming climate change impacts. He highlighted that that women and girls are among the most vulnerable victims of climate change, noting as an example that widows (of which Afghanistan has many due to years of conflict) often seek employment in farming and herding as a way of sustaining their families. Kassam described Afghanistan as abundant in natural resources and that collaborative efforts by local communities, scientists and government hold much potential to realize the potential of such resources. Dr. Kassam offered many examples from the traditional practices of indigenous communities to illustrate how people as individuals, and communities comprised of differing ethnic groups, can come together to overcome the challenges they face. Difference, he urged is to be celebrated, cherished and recognized as a potential source for strength and resilience. Following each of the lectures, Kassam then led participants through exercises he had devised that proved valuable for illustrating and

reinforcing key lecture lessons.



Figure 4: Dr. Kassam delivers a lecture at the President's Office

Figure 5: Group photo with Symposium participants

**8. Lecture to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs:** On the morning of June 26, the Institute of Diplomacy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosted a presentation by Dr. Kassam on the subject of "Speaking

Truth to Power with Grace and Humility: Scholarly Diplomacy in the Twenty-First Century”. Speaking to a packed house, Dr. Moheb Spingher, Head of the Institute, provided welcoming remarks that included thanks to KABUL and Kassam for providing a rare and unique learning opportunity for Afghan diplomatic personnel. Approximately 90 persons, of whom about a quarter were women, participated in the event. The vast majority of participants appeared to be under 35 years of age and included not only MOFA personnel, but also representatives from the Presidential Palace, Chief Executive’s Office, Ministry of Interior Affairs and the National Security Council. Noor Ahmad Akhundzadah, Dean of Environmental Sciences at Kabul University was also present. Kassam’s lecture combined elements that spoke to climate change, Islamic intellectual traditions and academic and diplomatic discourse. A lively Q&A session confirmed that the audience found Kassam’s lecture highly engaging and thought provoking.



Figure 6: Dr. Kassam’s presentation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the participants

Figure 7: Group Photo

9. **US Embassy:** Following the MOFA engagement, accompanied by KABUL/Lupul, Dr. Kassam moved to the US Embassy where he spoke via videoconference to three US Lincoln

Learning Centres located in Balkh, Bamiyan and Badakshan provinces of Afghanistan. The topic of his presentation was “The Role of Afghan Youth in Stewarding the Planet” (see attached powerpoint). The audience was comprised of 64 university students who proved very animated during the interactive session which was facilitated with the assistance of a Dari interpreter. **(COMMENT:** Lincoln Learning Centers are partnerships between the U.S. Embassy and host institutions. They serve as information outposts similar to a public library reference service. They provide access to current information via circulating book collections, the Internet, and through original content provided by guest speakers and lecturers like Dr. Kassam.)



**Figure 8: Dr Kassam speaks to university students via teleconference from the US Embassy (photo courtesy US Embassy)**

**10. Lecture at the American University of Afghanistan:** In the afternoon of June 26, accompanied by KABUL/Johnson, Dr. Kassam attended the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) where he presented a lecture on “Climate Change Impacts at the Local Level: Need for Anticipatory Capacity”. Participants included AUAF students, faculty and staff and also students and academics from other Kabul universities. During his presentation, Dr. Kassam spoke about the dramatic impact of climate change and the role of traditional knowledge in providing tools for adaptation (such as the timing of planting cycles). As with Dr. Kassam’s other engagements, a lively question and answer period followed. In his concluding remarks, Paul Revere of the Academic Support Services office of AUAF thanked KABUL for coordinating the presentation, noting that the students had been very pleased and interested to hear about the work being done by Kassam in their country and that it had opened their eyes to the opportunities for interesting and valuable research that may be all around them. He also commended Dr. Kassam for sharing his thoughts and experiences on the important topic of climate challenge and working to raise awareness of this important subject. Afterwards, Dr. Kassam was given a short tour around the university grounds where he learned about some of the security challenges faced by young Afghans in their desire for higher education, including an August 2016 attack by insurgents on the AUAF that killed 8 students and injured many more.



Figure 9: Dr. Kassam’s presentation at the AUAF

Figure 10: Dr. Kassam with AUAF leadership

11. **CONCLUSIONS:** Putting climate change on the minds of administrators, officials and a public who are all distracted by the daily grind of conflict and myriad other problems is no easy task. But there is little doubt that Dr. Kassam was hugely successful in doing so. Through a packed schedule that put him before students, academics, civil servants and senior government officials, his ability to connect his observations on climate change to the personal experience and intuition of Afghans of all stripes ensured that his message was consistently found relevant and resonant. Of course, as one of the few scientists to have actually tramped the mountains and valleys of the region, Dr. Kassam benefits from an immediate respect and credibility among Afghans that few other outsiders could hope to match. Through the course of his visit, he proved successful not just in raising awareness of climate change, but also in provoking Afghans to consider what might lie within their means to do. The most obvious example is the President’s decision to create a unit in his office to focus attention and effort on the problem. Having paired Kassam with the President’s office and assisted their discussions and planning over a number of months, KABUL has little doubt that the creation of that unit owes much to the Kassam visit. But it was also evident in the enthusiasm of all the audiences Kassam spoke to, many of whom told KABUL afterwards about the inspiration they had found in his lectures. The challenge for Afghanistan will be to sustain awareness and the desire for



action in the face of many pressing challenges and few resources. Resources and support for climate change action by Canada and other donors doubtless could play a vital role in stimulating sustained interest and greater efforts by Afghans.

12. In closing, KABUL wishes to acknowledge the very significant contributions by Dr. Kassam and Cornell University in working with us so successfully to truly put climate change in the spotlight in Afghanistan. Although the visit was timed to coincide with Dr. Kassam's summer field work, and supported where possible by KABUL, Dr. Kassam's extensive investment of his own time, energy and passion in the planning and execution of the program were the essential keys for success. With impacts stretching from the public all the way up to the Presidential Palace, it is an investment that is sure to continue to bear fruit for the benefit of Afghans and their environment.

Drafted: KABUL/Khetab & Lupul

Input: KABUL/Ali & Johnson

Approved: KABUL/Lupul