



Afghan-American Chamber of Commerce to Open Offices in Kabul, Kandahar

(Chamber will promote free market economy in Afghanistan)

By Afzal Khan, Washington File Special Correspondent

2003 - Washington, D.C. -- Afghan-American businessmen eager to rebuild war-torn Afghanistan have set up the Afghan-American Chamber of Commerce (AACC) in collaboration with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) in Washington. From his fledgling head office in the Washington suburb of Annandale, Virginia, AACC president and founding member of its board of directors said the AACC will open offices in Kabul, the capital, and in Kandahar, the main city in the south, in late May. Later this month, a founding member of the AACC board of directors, **Dr. Nadir Atash**, will start training the prospective Kabul office staff in information and data gathering. The activities of the Kandahar office will be overseen by Mahmood Karzai, also a founding member of AACC board of directors.

The move to set up collaboration between businessmen in Afghanistan and the United States through Afghan-Americans took formal shape during two days of meetings last December in Kabul and Kandahar. The AACC delegation from the United States was led by **Dr. Nadir Atash** and included former Congressman Donald Ritter, another founding member of AACC board of directors. The delegation also included Willard Workman, senior vice president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce; John Sullivan, vice president of CIPE; and Andrew Wilson, a senior program officer for Eastern Europe and Eurasia at CIPE. Afghan Commerce Minister Mustafa Kazemi, U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Robert Finn, and William Taylor, who coordinates reconstruction assistance from the U.S. embassy in Kabul, addressed those meetings.

A recent report on those meetings described AACC's mission as "the promotion of an open-market economy and a democratic political system in Afghanistan by ensuring that access to the market is open and fair." The strategy for achieving this goal is two-pronged. In the short term, AACC plans to take immediate steps "to raise awareness regarding the importance of an open-market economy in Afghanistan." In the long term, AACC expects to design and implement programs for the "creation of a unified national approach to improve the investment climate and to strengthen business associations, think tanks, and other business organizations inside Afghanistan," the report said. A major pillar of the AACC work in Afghanistan will be "to develop a constructive dialogue between the private sector and relevant state institutions," the report said. Commerce

Minister Kazemi invited Afghan businessmen abroad to invest in Afghanistan and promised to revise laws and regulations in order to facilitate investment in the private sector.

Among the immediate goals of AACC is to promote the export of Afghan carpets and handicrafts in the United States through the establishment of trade centers. In that regard, it was recommended that renewed efforts be made to provide facilities in Afghanistan for Afghan carpet weavers who are now operating in Pakistan, the report said. The report also recommended greater cooperation between the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan in facilitating transport of imported goods through Pakistan's port of Karachi overland to Afghanistan. Similarly, it was recommended that Pakistan allow the overland transport of imported goods from India to Afghanistan.

AACC plans to hold regular stakeholder meetings in Kabul and Kandahar and to strengthen existing links and form new ones with U.S. governmental and non-governmental organizations that are actively engaged in promoting an open-market economy and democratic values in Afghanistan. These organizations include NED, CIPE, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Department of Commerce, the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Afghan Embassy's Task Force in Washington. The highlight of AACC's efforts will be the establishment of an Economic Policy Institute (EPI), a think tank, to conduct research on international standards and experiences that could be applied to improve current private sector business practices in Afghanistan.

CIPE's Andrew Wilson, in a telephone interview on April 11, said the AACC will be "a key player" in articulating the needs of Afghan businessmen in "a constructive and targeted manner." Wilson added that CIPE is arranging a training program in May in Kabul that would focus on building "association management skills" for Afghan businessmen.