



July 17, 2010

Dear Madam Secretary,

It was a pleasure to meet you in Washington, D.C. in May. Your vision and leadership are an inspiration to us all; your commitment to the well-being of women the world over offers us hope. In anticipation of the upcoming Kabul Conference, I write to request your support for the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled in assisting us in addressing our distinctive challenges, performing our critical tasks, and serving the needs and aspirations of the Afghan people.

You understand well the problems our conflict-ridden country faces. Illiteracy, poor economic development, and acute poverty. Our Ministry's mandate extends to multiple populations affected by our conflict, including orphans, street children, female-headed households, and war veterans. We also aim to address the needs of the nearly one million persons disabled by war, disease, and landmines.

Our clients' problems are often interrelated, emotionally complex, and expensive to solve:

- War veterans and their families: The insurgency is adding both to the numbers of the disabled and to the burden on the families of our armed forces and civil servants who are associated by insurgent groups.
- Pensioners: Both civil and military pensioners depend on us to live with dignity in their old age. Yet state pensions are so meager that many do not consider it worthwhile to collect the benefits.
- The absence of an adequate pension system is a major incentive for government personnel to postpone retirement, and to secure job extension through patronage and other means.
- Female-headed households: The death of a bread winner plunges families into poverty, as most women lack marketable job skills, and rely on their young children for support.

Any of these tasks would be a major challenge for any government. Their combined weight makes our challenge overwhelming. Efforts to date have been disjointed, partial, and woefully inadequate given the scope and scale of the tasks at hand. We need support to tackle these problems.

We are now focused on three critical tasks, each of which requires international assistance to succeed. First, we want capable leadership and management within the Ministry. Though the capacity exists within the current labor market to build a functioning ministry, we will be unable to hire sufficient numbers of skilled personnel with the current average government salary of \$60 per month. We estimate that we will need \$3-10 million to secure the required skills from the market over the next three years. Second, we want to improve our policy and program design, addressing challenges through policies tailored to the Afghan context, while drawing from lessons learned from other countries around the world. We need international support to design and implement programs that deliver results. Third, we need help strengthening our inspection divisions for labor safety, and for our orphanages and kindergartens.

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We are developing a series of innovative ideas addressing each of our major challenges, and need support to implement these programs. Vocational training serves as an illustration of the new approach we are adopting. We have over 11 million illiterate adults in need of semi-skilled and skilled jobs, many of which are currently filled by Pakistani laborers. Our current capacity for vocational training is only 15,000 students a year. Members of the Afghan Chamber of Commerce and Industry tell us that the current training does not meet industry requirements and the private sector often needs to re-train these students.

Our alternative approach, based on our analysis of the agricultural, construction, manufacturing, extraction, and service industries, reveals enormous opportunities for the use of vocational training programs based on a model of stackable, nationally-recognized credentials. Through these programs, a trainee acquires leading to a level of competence necessary to enter the market, and has the incentive and the opportunity to return for cumulative qualifications. Deploying such a model, which promotes transparency and accountability for both trainers and trainees, could result in enhanced labor force productivity and provide skills at each level within sector value chains.

Since my appointment as minister, I have established a strong partnership with Ambassador Fiksborg and the U.S. Embassy; the support we are receiving is making a big difference. Beyond this, I would like to ask for your personal assistance in helping mobilize USAID and the U.S. Departments of Labor, Agriculture, Commerce, and Veterans Affairs to assist us. We would be grateful if in your contact with the philanthropic community—particularly with emerging foundations—you would raise awareness and mobilize support to help us overcome these many challenges. We would also welcome a visit from Secretary Sulis.

Permit me once again, Madam Secretary, to thank you for receiving us in Washington, D.C. We look forward to seeing you in Kabul on July 26.

Yours Sincerely,


Amir Afshar,
Minister of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled