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Afghan Security Uncertain Despite Gains in Agriculture

By Sean Maroney

More than 2,000 Afghan politicians, tribal elders and community leaders are in Kabul this week to discuss relations with the United States and reconciliation efforts with the Taliban. Foreign policy analysts say peace in Afghanistan depends more on development, especially in the country's agriculture sector, than just on security forces.

The United Nations says violence in Afghanistan is at its worst since the U.S.-led invasion in late 2001. But as Afghan leaders meet in Kabul to determine how best to combat the violence, the country's Agriculture Minister Mohammad Asef Rahimi says that crops and not guns will determine Afghanistan's future.

"Long-term stability in Afghanistan cannot materialize without stabilizing agriculture situation in the country. Unfortunately, the investment level in agriculture has been quite small relative to perhaps some other sectors," he said.

No definitive statistics exist on foreign direct investment in Afghanistan. But the United Nations estimates that it accounted for \$185 million in 2009.

Malou Innocent is an expert of foreign policy at the CATO Institute. She does not think more foreign money in Afghanistan will have a positive impact. "Up until about three years ago, the Ministry of Finance didn't know where 80 percent of their money was going. So I mean, these are sort of critical issues and not just money, but in terms of core competency, how they're efficiently using the money that's already being given," she said.

Innocent says government corruption, coupled with incompetence and mismanagement, plagues the reconstruction effort and contributes to the country's insecurity.

But Agriculture Minister Rahimi sees positive developments. He says his ministry is close to realizing one of its goals of producing enough food to feed all Afghans and sell to others.

He also sees an evolving U.S.-Afghan relationship as foreign forces continue to withdraw by 2014. "I think it is going to be much more directed toward development, governance issues, long-term partnership [and] less likely to be more on the military side. So this is perhaps a good indication that stability in Afghanistan is somehow slowly coming to be

achieved," he said.

But despite gains in agriculture, Afghanistan remains unstable, in part due to the country's biggest cash crop, opium-producing poppies.

A recent U.N. report shows poppy cultivation is up for the second straight year due to high opium prices and insecurity. This comes despite Afghan and foreign efforts to eradicate the problem.