

Touchdown in the land of good hope

Kabul's nuts-and-bolts stores and proud residents make it the capital of Afghanistan's resilience, says **SUDHIR VOHRA**

THE Ariana Boeing sliced through the cloud cover over the Kabul Valley, ringed on all sides with snow-tipped mountains, and circled twice to begin its descent into the airport. My first sight was of roofless buildings and of shells of burnt-out aircraft lying scattered around the airport. None of the familiar sights of cars moving below, nor of smoke wafting out from the chimneys of factories or houses. The landscape below had the static synthetic look of a map — not of bustling activity of a capital city.

When the plane touched down and taxied in, the feeling was eerie — ours was the only commercial airplane on the airport, and the others were military craft in khaki colours. Near the parking bay — on the grassy space near a burnt out hanger — lay the remains of about eight Ariana airplanes. All huddled together in a heap of blue and white metal.

It was a cold and wet afternoon, but the air over Kabul was crisp and almost alpine. The Indian Embassy personnel efficiently shepherded the us 19 delegates into a bus they had hired for us. The arrival lounge had large aluminum frame windows sans glass, there were no light fittings in the aluminum ceiling (only the wires were hanging), and the floor was wet because the roof of the building had a gaping hole in it. Onyx marble stonewalls cladding (?) pockmarked with bullet holes,

During my morning walk I saw no guns, no rocket launchers and no hostility. When I told people where I came from, they broke into smiles. And Bollywood, perhaps, is our best ever ambassador

and a neat bullet hole in the windshield glass of the blue airport bus: telltale marks of a city ravaged by two decades of war.

The drive through Kabul to the Intercontinental Hotel was the next eye-opener: the empty shells of buildings, — now brown and muddy — the large graveyards of trucks and construction vehicles. The hotel sits on a vantage hilltop overlooking Kabul. A long winding road creeps up to a building, which, at one time, must have been a beautiful piece of architecture. Our hosts had organised a lunch in the ballroom, and here I saw the first semblances of what I realised later was obviously a proud race attempting to rebuild their lives from the debris of destruction.

There were coloured flags around the driveway of the Intercontinental. The pond at the entrance was water-

less, but the surface had been freshly painted and the fountains had obviously been repaired recently. The ballroom — capable of taking in about a thousand guests — had lights and a chandelier, and there was fresh table linen on the six roundtables set up for us. The waiters were smart enough and with clean uniforms and the food was good. We were served the traditional biryani, roast meats, and Afghani naans. Pepsi in cans, and paper napkins. There were neither service tables nor waiters' sideboards, so the dishes were cleared and stacked in the corner of the banquet hall on the floor. Again, signs of a city coming to grips with reality, doing its best.

Our schedule till

dusk was hectic: meetings with Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, the commerce minister, Minister State for International Relations, and with Mr. Ghani, Principal Advisor to Hamid Karzai on economic affairs. The Arg Palace, where we had also hoped to meet with Karzai, is a beautiful piece of architecture — its approach is a wide tree-lined avenue with well laid footpaths — very European in style. Kabul's architecture has absolutely nothing Islamic about it — there are no pointed arches in the modern buildings, no minarets except in the odd mosque, and no semblance of the styles one sees in the Gulf. All the buildings are of styles one would expect in any modern cosmopolitan city.

The palace reminded me of Tashkent, with its large courtyards with fruit trees placed geometrically and carefully, low-rise blocks with beautiful volumes and entrances and a cheer which emanated out of the architects' pencils and drawing boards. Surprisingly, there was very little destruction in the palace: a few broken windowpanes and the odd broken

roof.

It was only when we drove past the parts of Kabul which houses various embassies that I realised how the wrath of the Afghan people had been vented on the Russians. This was the only compound which had been completely destroyed. It had nothing left except parts of the structure, just brick and concrete shells of the buildings. On the other hand, most of the other missions, though shut down, were largely intact.

Our delegation collected in the Indian High Commission in the evening and spent the night in Insaf Hotel, which is about half a kilometre from the mission. One European guest was the only other inhabitant. The rooms were bare, but passable. Mine did not have either a lock or a handle on the door: an electric wire tied through the holes where a handle once must have existed sufficed.

The hotel owner and his son were extremely hospitable — they had returned from Pakistan after three years to restart their venture. The furniture — heavy chromeplated steel chairs and a few tables — was obviously re-

cent. The rooms contained only a bed and bedding, but the first semblance of self-respect was visible: the family had got a few garden umbrellas and some flags on the first floor terrace. The Insaf Restaurant had a string of coloured pygmy bulbs hung up outside its little entrance. *Kahwa* (Afghan tea) too was abundantly available: the water was heated by using an immersion rod in a metal bucket.

Kabul has a curfew at 10 pm, which lifts at 5 am. But it was the morning walk which opened my eyes to the resilience of the Afghan people. I walked around for about a kilometre or two in all directions. No guns; no rocket launcher carrying militia, and no hostility — only curiosity as to which country I belonged to. On hearing the word (almost a magic word) *Hind*, the three persons who asked my identity broke into smiles.

There is a tremendous amount of goodwill for Indians in Kabul — it is evident from the way the man in the street perceives us. Bollywood is perhaps our best brand ambassador. The little street corner stalls have tapes of *Mohabbatein* available for as little as

50 rupees, and the music blaring from the speakers are Indian movie songs.

The morning brought about another revelation — the shops. While apples, vegetables and other greens are easily available, I found a clutch of building hardware store proudly displaying their wares. Freshly painted shops with a scant range, of course, but open nevertheless. Shop fronts containing building hardware, toilet goods, pipes and fixtures, lighting and chandeliers, furniture and velvet sofas, even a display of plastic chairs and tables on the pavement. Obvious and vibrant signs of a city lifting itself from the ruins of decades of war and eager to move on.

It has been only about eight weeks since the Afghan interim administration has begun its difficult task of setting the house in order — these few

whom I met on Kabul's streets. Yes, there are the odd beggars; a burkha-clad woman outside the hotel, the odd urchin looking for alms — but none of the able-bodied (or even injured) men were begging. They have an extraordinary stoic look-you-in-the-eye demeanour about them.

Kabul is limping back into normalcy, and needs a lot of help. The mule cart is the obvious mode of transport locally used. Traffic signals don't work but the odd policemen was desperately trying to whistle his control over motorists. Very few land telephones work, and electricity is erratic.

If I were tasked to sum up as to how we Indians could make our presence felt in Afghanistan, I would put it this way: the Afghans are a proud self respecting race, and have had good historic relations with India.



Pictures courtesy Sudhir Vohra



weeks have also been winter months, and the snow on the peaks around Kabul is still fresh and white. The nights are cold (below freezing), and if the day is cloudy or wet, one needs overcoats as well. Yet, by 9 am itself, shops selling paint and plywood were thrown open.

One shop had a half dozen signboards being painted — all in blue over a white background — with signboards proclaiming addresses of various aid agencies. I asked the man why they were all blue over white? His burst of laughter and the glee in his eyes floored me. "Because blue is the only paint colour I have!" he said in broken Urdu.

There is no semblance of self-pity in the eyes or faces — nor in the body language — of the Afghan people

There is nothing about them, which indicates self-pity or depression. They do not need — nor deserve — a condescending, patronising attitude. They are smart enough to understand immediately if they are being exploited. They do need aid at this moment — but genuine from-the-heart aid. We need to deal with them honestly, genuinely, and with our heads held high, for they respect pride, honour and strength. We need to assist them to rebuild their lives and cities. This is going to be a long haul. Any myopic vision about how Indian Industry can work in Afghanistan shall be catastrophic.

(Architect Sudhir Vohra travelled with the CII Kabul Mission to Afghanistan on behalf of the Council of Architecture, India)