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postcard
from the
edge

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THE skeletons of destroyed aircraft are still visible at Kabul airport. Mute reminders of the two decades of war which brought Afghanistan to almost a grinding halt. The airport building still leaks from a few places when it rains. The glass panes are different colours, but the panes are there — keeping out the cold.

Two years ago, almost to the day, I had seen petrol being sold in tin cans along the street — now there are petrol pumps dispensing the fuel from brand new machines, although the asphalt of the pump is still cracked and pitted. The cab-driver talks about which route he shall take to avoid the traffic jams that occur near the few bridges which connect the two sides of Kabul. Public transport in the form of 300 odd TATA buses — a gift from India — are seen everywhere in the city. There are a few Chinese restaurants, and a Dilli Durbar as well.

Two cellphone companies compete fiercely to satisfy the customer — the billboards show an elderly Afghan,



Telecom cables, cellphone antennae mark this building

dressed in traditional garb, talking to his son, wearing a suit and working on a computer. Three winters after the war against terror changed every-

thing in landlocked Afghanistan, the changes are evident and moving fast. While the odd *burkha* is still visible in the streets, there are many

From the ashes of war, Kabul is once again reaching towards the sky as proud and resilient Afghans rebuild their shattered city

The Rising

Afghan women going to work with the *chador* draped over western clothes. The MOC building — at seventeen stories, it is the tallest concrete structure in Kabul — stands proudly in the central district with cellphone antennae bristling on the rooftop.

On this trip, I spent five days in the country. The impressions of the trip made in 2002 were only reinforced now: the Afghans are a resilient and proud people. While there was the odd beggar in the street — a child or a woman — none of them had any self pity on their faces. I saw men on crutches laughing as it snowed, hobbling on crutches made of twigs and rope.

There is something unbe-

lievable about the pride and resilience of the Afghan people. At the guesthouse I was staying in, the young man who came in to open the kitchen rode 10 km in the snow to reach the place at 5.30 am — with a gleaming smile, he told me about the Indian engineers who had gifted

him the money to buy a bicycle.

There is also open appreciation for the work being done by the Indians. A free hospital for children is run by Indian doctors; the roads are being laid by Indian engineers and labourers; and Indian engineers and technicians have set up a cellular phone network which connects the five major cities — Kabul, Herat, Mazar, Kandahar and Jalalabad. Work is going on at a furious pace to connect the 26 provincial cities with a state of the art GSM network. The SIM card has become a much sought after asset, next to probably the TV and the dish antenna. One can see locals walking around in torn clothing, clinging to a cellphone.



A reconstructed roundabout

Yet, Kabul's landscape sobers one down immediately. While there is some construction work going on in the Central Business District, the suburbs are still a graveyard of the ravages of war — roofless muddy walls are the only reminders of what must have been large palatial bungalows at one time.

The beginnings of reconstruction are there for any sensitive eye to see: the first step is the reinstallation of the boundary wall and the gate — brightly painted gates are available for sale in the suburban market near the university. One sees the odd reconstructed house in the suburbs. It is a sobering site — a brightly painted structure stands next to a row of rubble and destroyed concrete.

Through all this, there are signs of a

proud race rebuilding their land. There is one solitary KONICA photo shop, and the first and only bank — the Standard Chartered Bank branch has set up shop in the city. There is the CHELSEA supermarket which caters to the growing expat population, and offers the basic ranges of tinned and bottled food to anyone who can afford it. Food comes in from the neighbours — Uzbek carton milk and Nestle juices, fruit and potatoes, Pakistan packet teabags, and

The lone Konica photo shop



bottled mineral water from Tajikistan and Iran. There is a bread factory in Kabul making western style bread, though many places can serve the traditional *Afghani naan*.

The locals say this is a tough winter: "when the roads become easier, more food will flow in from the borders". In the guesthouse, all the local Afghani help ate the vegetarian fare which was made for the Indian engineers who were my hosts. The Afghani feels equal to any in the world, and his appreciation is deep and heartfelt when he tells you how much he appreciates this little gesture from the Indians. It is perhaps this unique partnership that shall change this part of the Hindukush mountains — on two occasions when I was asked where I was from, I made the mistake of saying "India". Both times, the Afghan broke into a smile and said "Oh, Hindustan".

Almost two years ago, the writer travelled with the CII Kabul Mission to Afghanistan on behalf of the Council of Architecture, India. He recorded his impressions in an article in The Indian Express, February 21, 2002. Two winters later, he was back for a revisit