



July 22, 2014

THEWORLDPOST

A PARTNERSHIP OF THE HUFFINGTON POST AND BERGGRUEN INSTITUTE ON GOVERNANCE

Omaid Bahar Fruit Company In Afghanistan Badly Damaged By Taliban Suicide Bomber

Reuters | Posted: 12/26/2012 2:22 am EST | Updated: 12/26/2012 9:13 am EST



By Michael Georgy

KABUL, Dec 26 (Reuters) - When a Taliban suicide bomber killed two people on the edge of the Afghan capital this month, there was another casualty - a global fruit juice business optimistically called "Spring Wish" which provided work for thousands of farmers across the country.

Mustafa Sadiq's empire had been expanding healthily, bringing in badly needed foreign capital, before the attack inflicted the kind of financial loss cash-strapped Afghanistan can ill afford.

The pomegranate juice business was nearly wiped out in the split second it took the militant to detonate explosives in a truck parked near the factory on Dec. 17.

Pieces of shredded metal were scattered everywhere. Chairs were hurled across the office where Sadiq had spent so much time figuring out how to beat the odds against decades of war, instability and hopelessness.

Sadiq was in Dubai drumming up new export deals when an assistant called with the bad news. The call that Sadiq said he did not get is also troubling him.

"So far no officials, for the sake of sympathy, have called us," Sadiq, 40, told Reuters, standing beside a year's supply of juice in containers that were ruined in the attack - nearly \$10 million in losses overall.

"In this situation they should have called me and asked what kind of help they could provide. The agriculture, finance, commerce ministries. Nobody so far has visited or called."

The impact of the war, and expectations for the future, are often seen only through the eyes of Western or Afghan soldiers, or officials who point to the progress that has been made.

Sadiq offers another perspective. Some workers told him the bomber triggered the loudest blast they had heard in 30 years.

A Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was followed by a decade of resistance by mujahideen fighters who drove them out. Then warlords carved out fiefdoms and destroyed half of the capital in the civil war that followed.

DIRTY POLITICS

The Taliban took over, were toppled in 2001 and are now raising fears they may return when U.S.-led NATO troops hand over security to Afghan forces in 2014.

But Sadiq does not see the Taliban as the biggest threat to Afghanistan's future. Instead, he says, officials have turned politics into a commercial enterprise driven by corruption.

"Government employees think it's time to fill their pockets and grab whatever they can. That will pave the way for civil war," said Sadiq, as workers feverishly loaded boxes of the little fruit juice left onto a truck, and others worked to rebuild a brick wall.

"You have to struggle, not run away. It is kind of like running away now. They have walls around themselves sitting there and they do not have contact with ordinary Afghans."

His disillusionment is shared by the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries.

"There is no guarantee for investment in Afghanistan. People are afraid of the government, there is no rule of law. Government officials can do anything they want," the chamber's first vice-chairman, Jan Alokzai, told Reuters.

"President (Hamid) Karzai's words are only on paper and don't have any value."

Afghanistan's U.S.-backed government says it is committed to building up the economy, attracting foreign investment and helping Afghans secure a brighter future. Karzai says it is contracts with foreigners that spread graft.

WISHFUL THINKING?

The government has highlighted 2014 as a year to invest in Afghanistan, which relies heavily on foreign aid, and to take advantage of its cheap labour and land leases.

In each of the 10 years following 2014, the government hopes revenues from oil, natural gas, iron, copper and other mining ventures will generate \$4 billion in revenue.

Sadiq spent time in Europe, waiting for an opportunity to return and invest in his homeland. He eventually opened a factory in an industrial park along Kabul's dusty Jalalabad Road in 2008, from where he broke into overseas markets.

Spring Wish, which employed about 1,000 people, was selling produce to the health conscious in Europe, Asia and the Middle East, bringing money into Afghanistan, while anxious Afghans carted \$4.5 billion in cash out of the country last year to safety.

But when asked about the maps on a wall identifying parts of Afghanistan which offer opportunities for farmers and businesses like his, Sadiq could only put his head in his hands and cry.

The dark red seeds from Sadiq's fruits were prized in Europe for their antioxidant qualities, and in Japan where many believe they can help fight cancers. He seems most proud of the fact that he helped 40,000 farmers across Afghanistan earn a living.

As Sadiq tries to persuade his staff to keep dreaming big and to rebuild, one question may haunt him for some time. The suicide bomber parked his truck in a lane between his company and a foreign firm.

The Taliban said it attacked an American company next door, but he still wonders whether his factory, which relied on Italian machinery and benefited from U.S. aid programmes, was the target. And he acknowledges he is desperate for money from Western donors.

"Around 120 people were working here and this factory was totally destroyed in the suicide attack," said Mohammed Jaw, 28, a general operator for the company. "A number of our workers will lose their jobs and now everyone is concerned about what happens next."

Despite the loss, Sadiq's entrepreneurial and marketing spirit seems intact.

"Have you tried the juice with mulberry flavour?" he asked proudly. "It's really good."

Then a worker brought the moment back to reality. He lifted his cellphone to show a photograph of the suicide bomber's severed head. (Additional reporting by Mirwais Harooni; Editing by Nick Macfie)

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