

Promoting US Interests and Development in Tajikistan

Susan M. Elliott

United States Ambassador to the Republic of Tajikistan

When the Soviet Union collapsed over two decades ago, the United States was one of the first nations to recognize Tajikistan as an independent country. Shortly thereafter, a civil war began that lasted for five years and caused considerable death and destruction. Even as fighting diminished in the late 1990s, the suffering of the Tajik people continued. Hunger stalked the land. Damage to roads, bridges, and other infrastructure in some parts of the country was extensive. Economic prospects were bleak because the war had interfered with market development. The United States Government, through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and other agencies, began humanitarian relief efforts to help provide basic nutrition to those hardest hit by the devastation of war. In the years since, US assistance programs have evolved from providing only humanitarian assistance to building human capacity and creating long-term, sustainable economic development.

We deepened our partnership with Tajikistan in 2001 when the US-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) began military action in Afghanistan. Sharing an 800-mile long border with Afghanistan, Tajikistan became an important partner by maintaining transit routes in and out of Afghanistan, and working with us to improve the security environment. Today, our bilateral assistance program to Tajikistan is robust. Our programs support economic development, democratization, health, education, energy, agriculture, and activities to combat terrorism and narcotics trafficking.

Challenges Facing Tajikistan: Weak Economic Development, Energy Deficits, Food Insecurity, and Lack of Transparency

International Organization for Migration (IOM) statistics¹ estimate that more than one million Tajik citizens, out of a population of eight million, live and work in foreign countries, mainly Russia. Remittances from these workers accounted for approximately 50 percent of Tajikistan's Gross Domestic Product in 2014. One-third of Tajikistan's citizens are under the age of 14. The large population of young Tajiks has put a huge strain on the country's social welfare and educational systems. Clearly, Tajikistan needs to increase economic growth and create jobs. Investments in energy and transportation infrastructure, education, and health care will create jobs and increase possibilities for trade and foreign direct investment.

While only about seven percent of Tajikistan's territory is arable land, most Tajiks are employed in the agriculture sector. Tajikistan remains food insecure, with many women and children not receiving adequate nutrition. Enhanced agricultural production and competitiveness will encourage regional cooperation and prosperity, especially in rural areas where most people live.

¹ "Tajik Migrants with Re-entry Bans to the Russian Federation," IOM, 2014.

Women constitute a particularly vulnerable group in Tajikistan. 19 percent of Tajik women report experiencing domestic violence, according to Tajik government statistics. Families often prioritize their limited resources to educate male children over female children. Many marriages are unregistered, leaving women without legal rights to family property or child support in the case of divorce.

The Tajik government has enacted many laws in accordance with its international obligations, but implementation remains inconsistent. There is also a strong need for more transparency, not only by the government, but also in business transactions. According to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) Election Observation Missions, both the 2013 Presidential election and the recently concluded Parliamentary elections in March 2015 were fraught with irregularities. The most recent OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission issued a statement of findings critical of the parliamentary campaign conditions and the conduct of voting, noting numerous reports of ballot box stuffing and other irregularities.²

US-Tajikistan Cooperation Today

During my time as United States Ambassador to Tajikistan, we have helped the government and people of Tajikistan address these challenges. Together, we have sought improvements in many areas including increased trade opportunities, energy security, economic development, agricultural production, health, nutrition, police reform, border security, counternarcotics, and counterterrorism. Many US agencies are engaged in this broad effort.

In 2013, Tajikistan joined the World Trade Organization (WTO), with significant technical assistance and political support from the United States. The Tajik government ratified its WTO post-accession implementation action plan in early November 2014. We continue to provide technical assistance to help the government implement its WTO mandated laws and regulations.

We have also achieved success in helping Tajikistan become more economically integrated with the regional economy. Trade, water, and energy figure prominently in this effort. We support programs now underway to strengthen trade ties and facilitate the flow of goods among Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. We are contributing \$15 million and providing technical assistance to the countries involved in the proposed Central Asia South Asia 1000 (CASA-1000) energy project. This regional project will develop electric transmission lines that will allow Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic to export excess energy to Pakistan via Afghanistan in the summer when the demand for electricity in Pakistan is especially high.

Recognizing that youth are a key demographic group in Tajikistan, we have supported civically-engaged and socially-conscious young people's efforts to take ownership of their future. We awarded more than 100 Youth Action grants, which allowed local

² "Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions," OSCE/ODIHR International Election Observation Mission to the Republic of Tajikistan - Parliamentary Elections, March 1, 2015.

youth to address a wide range of problems identified in their communities and expand their civic engagement.

In recent years, we awarded grants totaling over \$86,000 to support the expansion of democracy in Tajikistan. Examples include a grant focused on educating rural men and women on their rights as guaranteed by the Tajik constitution, especially those related to human rights. Another grant encouraged Tajik youth to become more politically engaged.

Our Community Policing program has created opportunities to empower police, local government, civil society, and community representatives to participate actively in community decision-making activities. We cooperated with Tajikistan's Ministry of Internal Affairs to establish Community Policing Partnership Teams (CPPTs) composed of police, government, and community members. We provided training to participants on how to identify, prioritize, and address local problems related to crime, safety, and quality of life. Today the program includes 30 Community Policing Centers under the supervision of 17 CPPTs in all regions of Tajikistan.

Tajikistan is a focus country under President Obama's Feed the Future Program. Through this program our assistance concentrates on agriculture, economic development, health, and nutrition to improve food security. Additionally, we encouraged the Tajik government to join the international "Scaling-Up-Nutrition" (SUN) movement in September 2013. The government committed to an interagency process that will make policy and create a regulatory framework for improving the nutrition of the people of Tajikistan. UNICEF and USAID are donor partners for Tajikistan's participation in this international effort.

Over the past two years, USAID activities improved the productivity of smallholder farmers and strengthened the capacity of households to grow and consume more nutritious foods. By addressing constraints to farming knowledge, market access, input usage, and finance, rural Tajik families, including those headed by women, produced more food for home use and market sale on small land plots and in household farms. Our support improved irrigation access and land tenure for smallholder farmers, strengthened fruit and vegetable value chains, and linked farming households to new commercial opportunities.

Facing Common Threats and Challenges

The United States and Tajikistan share common interests because we face common threats, in the form of transnational terrorism, violent extremism, and narcotics trafficking. Trade in illegal narcotics is a major threat to all the countries of Central Asia and beyond. Profits from the narcotics trade finance militant extremist groups, and contribute to corruption and lawlessness in the transit countries.

Tajikistan plays a key role in maintaining regional stability and countering the threat of violent extremism. To help Tajikistan deal with the threat of cross-border narcotics trafficking, the Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement developed the Central Asian Counter-Narcotics Initiative. The objective of the program is to disrupt the flow of narcotics from Afghanistan and dismantle transnational

criminal organizations. We have helped Tajik authorities investigate, prosecute, and convict narcotics traffickers. We also assisted the Tajik government to develop a counternarcotics task force and improve their forensic and investigative capabilities.

The United States Department of Defense has provided training and equipment to Tajikistan's counterterrorism forces, conducted strategic workshops on counterterrorism-related issues, and improved the skills of Tajik counterterrorism specialists through the Combating Terrorism Fellowship Program. In addition, the Department of Defense's Central Command has committed over \$100 million to the construction of border outposts, customs checkpoints, and training and equipping Tajik security forces to interdict narcotics shipments. Tajik security forces use US-provided communications equipment to identify, observe, and interdict drug traffickers.

Since its inception, the Department of State's Antiterrorism Assistance Program has trained 1,276 Tajik police and security specialists from Tajikistan's Drug Control Agency, Committee of Emergency Situations, Ministry of Internal Affairs, and other agencies.

Moving Forward

It is hard to predict where Tajikistan will be a decade from now. Establishing reliable, affordable sources of energy, decreasing barriers to trade with neighboring countries, increasing agricultural production, and fighting illicit transit of drugs, weapons, and terrorists are all vital elements of a stable prosperous future for Tajikistan. Less corruption and more transparency will open doors to foreign investment. Firmly established rule of law and accountable, competent governance will increase the likelihood of foreign investment. Improving educational opportunities for Tajikistan's next generation as well as creating more opportunities for women will be extremely important in building a brighter, more stable future for the people of Tajikistan. We value our strong bilateral relationship and remain a committed partner with the government and people of Tajikistan. We will continue to work closely with our Tajik friends to promote stability, security, and economic prosperity, not only for the people of Tajikistan but also for Central Asia, Afghanistan, and other countries of the region.