

# Abbie Aryan

## Returns to Afghanistan

By Katsui Kaya, IOM Kabul

Abbie Aryan, a UK civil servant of Afghan origin, was overwhelmed to see his motherland after 20 years. "When I started to see the mud houses from the plane, tears started falling from my eyes. I knew it was a poor country, but I couldn't help weeping when I finally saw it myself," he says.

Abbie is one of the Afghan experts contributing to Afghanistan's development under the Professional Afghan Expatriate Programme – EU (PAEP-EU), which IOM implements in close coordination with the Afghan Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission.

Funded by the European Commission, the project aims to contribute to the long-term stability and development of the country through the deployment of 17 highly qualified Afghan expatriates living in EU member states who will share their skills and expertise in various ministries and public institutions during their assignments of up to one year in Afghanistan.

Abbie assumed his new post as Senior Advisor at the Ministry of Counter-Narcotics in April 2007. His primary responsibility is to advise the Minister on a variety of policies and coordination issues to achieve the ultimate goal of eradicating narcotics production in Afghanistan.

Abbie argues that the government needs to follow three steps – security, development and law enforcement – to stamp out the country's thriving narcotics industry.

In Helmand province, classified as an Extreme Risk/Hostile Environment by UN security officials, for example, 110,000 hectares of opium poppies are currently under cultivation – equivalent to roughly 40 per cent of the world's opium production. The reason is lack of security, he observes.

After improving general security, development issues need to be addressed.

"We have to implement alternative livelihood projects and build bridges, roads, irrigation channels and so on to give farmers a chance to switch from an illicit crop to something legal," says Abbie.

Poppy producers also need to understand that life will be better without the poppy and that those who stop the illicit production will receive a lot of support from the central government, he argues.

The Ministry of Counter-Narcotics has already created such a mechanism called the Good Performance Initiative, which awards development grants to provinces that stay narcotics free. The mechanism is closely observed and coordinated through Abbie's office.

Abbie was 14 when his family immigrated to the UK during the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in the late 1980s. After completing a law degree in London, Abbie worked as a civil servant with the Immigration and Nationality Directorate of the Home Office.

His life was blessed with everything one can hope for – a good job, four children, a home – but something was still missing, he says.

"About 90 per cent of heroin in the UK comes from Afghanistan. I know how it affects people's lives and I thought per-

haps I could explore this and do something about it," he observes.

Driven by this urge to help, Abbie returned to Afghanistan by himself. He still feels difficulty living in an environment with so many security restrictions and misses his family.

But he is committed to his work and one of his ambitions is to mainstream Afghanistan's National Drug Control Strategy into the country's National Development Strategy.

Counter-narcotics is a cross-cutting issue across the Afghan government and therefore it is important for the government to build a counter-narcotics component within each national programme, he says.

"One ministry working by itself cannot be successful. It requires the whole machine of the government to work on this issue. This is the only way it can succeed and this is my main priority for now," says Abbie.

"I think I owe this to Afghanistan. This is the country where I was born. Whatever I do in the UK, it cannot be much because there are plenty of people there with better qualifications and experience. But in a country like this, even if I make a small contribution, it will be big," he smiles. **M**



◀ Abbie Aryan at his desk at the Ministry of Counter-Narcotics (Photo: © Katsui Kaya/IOM, 2007)