

## To the Afghan Land

It is Thursday morning; a short relaxing moment and I am smoking after breakfast. Thursdays and Fridays are the holidays in Afghanistan. I normally relax on Thursdays and try to re-charge my batteries for the coming week. Tasty almonds and raisins are served at the hotel. It is the beginning of spring now in Afghanistan. It is a little cool in the morning and evening and it rains more than you might imagine. The capital, Kabul, is 1,800 m above sea level. Perhaps because of this, when I first arrived, I felt the thinness of the air when I climbed and went down the stairs.

It has been about three weeks since I entered Afghanistan. It is my first visit to the country. I came to conduct a survey related to agricultural extension, however, due to security issues, it has been very difficult to visit the project sites. Security is also an issue in our daily lives. It is, of course, prohibited to walk around the town, and we have to ask the local staff to do all the shopping for us.

Still, I managed to visit the field several times. I understood that Kabul is an arid area with precipitation of around 280 mm per year. However, there has been quite a bit of rain since my arrival! This must have been a blessing for the farmers. Around Kabul, where people grow wheat and fruits, agriculture is a combination of rain-fed and irrigation using the traditional Karez. The Karez system is called Qanat in Iran, Faraj in the Gulf region and Khetara in West Africa. The idea, whatever the name, is similar. Karez are underground water channels with a series of vertical shafts that connect water sources to farmlands. In part of the project sites, many of the water channels were open channels. I heard that the narrow water channels merge from the upstream and become fairly wide channels. Afghanistan is a mountainous country and they have a traditional terraced farmlands system which is similar to the rice and crop terraces in Japan. The terraces are narrow in the hilly areas, and, in the lowlands around the Kabul

basin, they are rather wide and form a peaceful farming landscape.

In Kabul, the population is increasing rapidly. According to an information source, it has already exceeded 4 million and in future it will reach 6 million people. As the city has a limited amount of flat lands, the houses are sprawling up to the middle and top of the rocky hills, looking quite impressive. From a distance, there seems to be no road for vehicles to drive up. Even when I tried really hard to spot cars on the hill, I could see none. Hoses, which probably provide household water, can be seen stretching up to the hill top, and I could see people who were going up and down the steep stairs. When it rains, roads become muddy and garbage floats on the rivers. Still, people are going about doing their business, pulling carts and selling vegetables by the road – a bustling atmosphere that can be observed through the car window. At junctions and around important facilities, heavily armed security guards are placed to maintain public order.

In the Kabul basin, it feels that water resources are comparatively abundant due to the snow that falls on the surrounding mountain ranges. Because of the arid climate with its large temperature range, a variety of fruits such as delicious grapes, apricots and apples are produced using irrigated water from Karez. Vegetables we see in town do not look any inferior to the ones that are imported. In fact, whatever the looks may be, fruits and vegetables from Afghanistan are very tasty. I hope I can increase opportunities as much as possible to see the actual situation on the ground. The Afghan people I was acquainted with in the Gulf States and those who I met in Japan were all very kind and pro-Japanese. In the difficult environment, many Japanese experts are providing support for capacity building, being careful about their security. It will be my privilege to be able to contribute to the country and to increase more “Japanophiles” here in Afghanistan.

(By Zaitzu, May 2013)



Karez channels



Wheat farm with irrigation channels



Houses built almost all the way up to the top of the rocky mountain