

India grants \$70 millions for Afghan road project

By Amit Baruah

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NEW DELHI, MARCH 6. Displaying its continuing commitment to the cause of Afghan reconstruction, India today announced a grant of \$70 millions for constructing the Zaranj-Dilaram road in Afghanistan which will link the Iranian port of Chahbahar.

The announcement was made by the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, during his talks with the visiting Afghanistan President, Hamid Karzai, today. New Delhi's growing strategic cooperation with Kabul, which has raised some eyebrows in the region, will also include the handover of 300 trucks, jeeps and ambulances to the fledgling Afghan National Army beginning next month.

The talks with Mr. Karzai and India's decision to put its money where its mouth is a clear example of what can be done to leverage its neighbours in the region. The Foreign Office spokesman said that this amount for road reconstruction was "over and above" the grant of \$100 millions already in operation. A survey team would be visiting Afghanistan shortly to prepare a project report on the road repair.

According to the spokesman, Mr. Karzai was greatly appreciative of the gesture made by the Prime Minister in announcing the grant for the road construction. In the Afghan leader's view, it was akin to linking Afghanistan to the sea.

India and Afghanistan also signed a bilateral preferential trade agreement in the presence of Mr. Vajpayee and Mr. Karzai through which 50 to 100 per cent tariff concession would be permitted to 38 items from Afghanistan — these include dry and fresh fruits, seeds, medicinal herbs and precious stones. In turn, India would receive "duty-free access" for eight lines of export interest — including black tea, pharmaceutical products, ayurvedic and homeopathic medicines, refined sugar and cement.

The spokesman said the handing over of 300 vehicles to the Afghan National Army was the "first part" of the cooperation on the military front. During the talks between the two leaders, concern was expressed over the regrouping of the Al-Qaeda and Taliban elements. The importance of eradicating terrorism was also stressed.

The Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani, who called on Mr. Karzai separately, indi-

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cated that India was happy to continue with the training of Afghan police personnel. So far, 250 Afghan police officers and cadets had been trained. India was also willing to play a role in constitution-building and putting in place an electoral system in Afghanistan. The Afghan President said he would be happy to use Indian experts in these fields.

Mr. Karzai, who held a separate meeting with the President, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, later in the evening, also attended a banquet hosted in his honour by Dr. Kalam. Dr. Kalam said that India wished Afghanistan success in its efforts to put in place new constitutional and electoral processes and develop "indigenous" security structures. "In view of our close cooperation in the past, our cultural similarities, historical legacies and relevance of the development experience, we believe that India could productively contribute to your efforts in these areas."

Dr. Kalam said that in the recent past Afghanistan had been used as a "safe haven" for training, equipping and indoctrination for the purposes of terrorism and subversive activities directed against India.