

Afghanistan

Location

Afghanistan is located in southwestern Asia. Extending from about 600 miles north to south and 800 miles east to west with a land area of 264,000 square miles, the country is roughly the size of Texas. Lying between 29°N and 36°N latitude and 61°E and 75°E longitude, Afghanistan is bordered by China in the northeast, Pakistan in the southeast, Iran in the west, and Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan in the north. It is a landlocked country with extensive mountain ranges, but contains desert and plains regions, as well.

Geography

Mountains divide Afghanistan into three distinct regions: the northern plains, the central mountains, and the southern plateau.

With some of the most fertile land in Asia, the northern plains region is Afghanistan's major agricultural region. Although the land is rich and fertile in this area, because of inadequate rainfall, only areas where water is available, like river valleys and irrigated land can be farmed. In this area, rice and cotton crops are farmed. Sheep and goats are raised on the grasslands. This area also contains mineral resources and natural gas.

The central mountain region extends over two-thirds of the country and covers approximately 160,000 square miles. It is made up of tall peaks and deep valleys. The mountain ranges are an extension of the Himalayan Mountains. The backbone of the central mountains is the Hindu Kush or "Hindu killer" which extends from the southeast

to the northeast of Afghanistan. Its highest peaks are between 19,500 and 23,000 feet high. The Kuh-e-Baba Mountains make up the southwestern branch of the Hindu Kush mountain range. The Kuh-e-Baba Mountains are about 17,000 feet high. The highest mountain in the country is the Nowshak, which is located in the northeast near the border with Pakistan. Also located in the central mountains, is the 320-mile Kabul River, which has tributaries that are essential for the irrigation of agricultural areas.

Separated from the northern plains by the Hindu Kush, the southern plateau covers about 50,000 square miles and is 3,000 feet high. The region consists mainly of deserts and semi deserts. The largest deserts are the Registan, which covers about one-third of the region, the Dasht-i-Margo, and the Dast-i-Khash. Two major rivers, the Helmand and the Arghandab, are located in this region along with Lake Helmand, which is one of only a few lakes in Afghanistan.

Climate

Afghanistan's climate consists of extremely cold, severe winters and hot, dry summers. Rainfall is scarce, averaging about seven inches a year. During the time between December and March, the country experiences cold weather and snow. From June to September, it is very hot and dry.

The temperature difference between day and night can be very extreme. For example, in the southern deserts summer daytime temperatures reach 120°F, yet at night water freezes. In addition, strong winds called the bad-i-sad-o-bist-roz cause many sandstorms. Only in Kabul can relatively pleasant conditions be found due to the higher altitude.

Precipitation also occurs in extremes with more falling in the east. A record 53 inches has been recorded at the Salang Pass in the east while Farah in the west receives only about three inches of precipitation a year.

History

Afghanistan's history is long and troubled with many invasions and, in recent times, constant foreign interference. Afghanistan was part of the Persian Achaemenian Empire during the 6th century BC until Alexander the Great conquered it in the 4th century BC. After Alexander died, the area was partly under Seleucid control and partly under the northern Indian Maurya empire. Kaniska, the Kushan king took control during the 2nd century BC. During the Saffarids rule in 870, Islam was established in the region. The Mongols invaded Afghanistan in 1219. From this rule, independent principalities arose which were not united into one country until the 1700s. Later, in a series of wars, the British attempted to take control of the area but were unsuccessful. In the 1930s, moderate governments brought some political stability until 1973 when a coup supported by the Parcham Party ended the monarchy and made Afghanistan a republic. In 1977, the Parcham and Khalq parties formed the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. Friction between the two parties arose and rebellion against reform programs led to Soviet invasion in 1979 to prevent the government from being overthrown. Afghans organized a guerilla resistance and many others fled the country. For several years, the Soviets controlled the cities while the Guerilla fighters controlled the countryside until 1989 when the Soviets withdrew and rebels captured Kabul, overthrowing the communist government and setting up a provisional Islamic government. After 1992, Afghanistan had several governments consisting of a number of factions. In the late 1990s one of the factions the Taliban, a conservative Islamic

group, took control of the country. After the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York, the United States began an assault on Afghanistan targeting the alleged conspirator of the bombing, Osama bin Laden, a supporter of the Taliban. During this time, the Northern Alliance, a rebel faction, confronted the Taliban in an attempt to overthrow their power and take control of the government while the United Nations and others planned a post-Taliban government. Power struggles have still not been reconciled in Afghanistan.

Important Holidays

Important Afghan holidays are Nau-roz (New Year's Day)-March 21, Liberation Day-April 18, Revolution Day-April 27, Worker's Day-May 1, and Independence Day-August 18.

Population

Afghanistan has approximately 20 ethnic groups most with their own language and culture. About half of the people are Pashtuns, followed by Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras. Most Pashtuns are sedentary, living in the southern and eastern regions of Afghanistan. The Tajiks are mainly farmers inhabiting the northeast and western areas of the country. The Uzbeks are generally farmers that inhabit the area north of the Hindu Kush Mountains. The Hazaras are nomads that live in the central mountains. Afghans tend to have greater loyalty to their ethnic group than their country.

Currency

The currency of Afghanistan is the afghani, a paper currency that is divided into 100 pulis. The current (2002) exchange rate is 1 U.S. dollar = 4,726.30 Afghanistan afghani.

Education

The government requires that all children from 7 to 15 years of age attend school. Many are unable because there is a severe lack of schools and teachers due to constant conflict in the country. Only about 10 percent of males and far fewer females in Afghanistan are literate. In an attempt to improve literacy rates, some adult classes are given. The country has two universities, Ningrahar University established in Jalalabad in 1963 and Kabul University established in 1946. In addition, there are the Afghan Institute of Technology and the School of Agriculture. Many Afghans also travel to the U.S., Europe, and India in pursuit of college degrees.

Language

The official languages of Afghanistan are Pashto and Dari. About half of the people speak Pashto. A third of the people speak Dari. Uzbek and Turkmen are spoken in northern Afghanistan.

Religion

Most Afghans, approximately 99%, are Muslims. Some of the people are part of the Twelver sect of Shiites. The rest of the people are Ismailites or members of other sects. Islam plays a role in all area of society, strongly influencing family and community relationships and most other aspects of life.

Economy

Afghanistan is basically an agricultural and pastoral country based primarily on subsistence level agriculture. The gross national product is one of the lowest in the world. Cereal grains including wheat, corn, rice and barley are grown. In addition, vegetables, fruits, nuts, and cotton are harvested. Sheep are the most important

livestock. Cattle, goats, horses, donkeys, and camels are also raised. Three-fifths of the country's labor force is involved in agriculture and animal husbandry.

Trade

Leading exports of the country include cotton, fruits, nuts, natural gas, and rugs. Exports account for about 10% of the national income. Machinery, cars, petroleum products and textiles are imported into the country. Major importers of Afghan goods are the U.S., India, Pakistan, Japan, Germany, and Saudi Arabia. Japan, Singapore, and the U.S.S.R. are the primary exporters to the country.

Food

Cuisine in Afghanistan is a blend of cooking styles of groups that have occupied the country throughout its history with the greatest influence from Iran and India. Staples in the diet are rice and bread called naan. Pork is excluded from the diet because it is forbidden by the Islamic religion. The national dish is pilau, rice prepared with meat and vegetables. Naan is round flat bread baked in a tandoor or clay pot. Kebabs are another favorite. They consist of chunks of meat skewered with vegetables and grilled over an open fire. Fruits are plentiful and are a very important part of the diet. Jelabi is a very sweet dessert eaten by the Afghans. Tea is the national drink in Afghanistan. Alcohol is forbidden. Black tea is popular south of the Hindu Kush while green tea is more prevalent in the north. Sugar is considered a luxury because Afghans must pay extra for it.

Conclusion

Afghanistan is a country that has lived in constant turmoil, plagued by numerous invasions and incessant wars. Many of its people have fled the country, but those that remain have been forced to adjust their lifestyles to different governments with varying

governing principles. Even today, the threat of further uncertainty looms and continual conflict continues to pervade the country of Afghanistan.

Larrissa Gray