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FULL NAME: Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
CAPITAL: Kabul
LOCATION: Central Asia
BORDERING COUNTRIES: China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan
AREA: 647,500 square miles. Landlocked with mostly rugged mountains and some plains in the north and southwest.
AREA SIZE: Slightly smaller than the state of Texas.
POPULATION: 32,738,376 (June 2008 est.)
CLIMATE: Arid to semi-arid; cold winters and hot summers
RELIGION: Sunni Muslim and Shi'ite Muslim
LANGUAGE: Pashtu, Dari, Turkic languages
LIFE EXPECTANCY: Male: 44.04 years Female: 44.39 years (2008 est.)
INDEPENDENCE: August 19, 1919, from the United Kingdom
NATIONAL HOLIDAY: Independence Day, August 19

BACKGROUND: U.S.-led air strikes against Afghanistan were launched Oct. 7, 2001, for harboring Saudi exile Osama bin Laden, the top suspect in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in the United States. With the support of U.S. bombs and special forces, a loose collection of warlords called the Northern Alliance took control and captured Kabul in November. In mid-December, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul reopened after 12 years. Today, after decades of war, the economy is still in ruins, its environment is in a state of crisis. The country is riddled with land mines left from the war, which are still injuring and killing people on a daily basis.

POLITICAL SITUATION: An interim administration, headed by Hamid Karzai, took power December 22, 2001 after various delegates in Bonn, Germany, signed an accord. The administration ruled for six months, and an emergency loya jirga (Traditional Grand Assembly) was convened to decide on a transitional authority to lead Afghanistan until the people could elect a permanent government. Karzai was elected president by the loya jirga in June 2002 and appointed a cabinet. In 2004, Karzai was elected to a five-year term in the country's first nationwide post-Taliban vote. The next presidential election is scheduled for August 2009.

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