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PHOTOS BY JAMES CARBONE / CORRESPONDENT

**DEDICATED:** Dr. Steven Kwon of Pasadena looks over Kabul, Afghanistan, late last year. Kwon founded Nutrition Education International to harvest soybeans in the country, in an effort to improve nutrition.

## Harvesting hope

Pasadenan sows soybeans to nourish a nation



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## Harvesting hope

# Pasadenan sows soybeans to nourish a nation

By Marshall Allen Staff Writer

MAZAR-E-SHARIF, AFGHANISTAN - The toddler lies still, vacant eyes staring into space.

His name is Tabor Shah. He's 2 and bundled in a cold room in the pediatric malnutrition ward of Civilian Hospital in this bustling city. Around his neck he wears a leather pouch. It's called a holy roll, a gift from the mullah to keep the devil away.

Tabor's mother, Shaish, must feel the devil won't leave her alone. One by one, four of her children have died of disease in recent years. Tabor is the only one left and he's badly malnourished. She sits beside him on a bed in the bare cement room, gazing at the boy while telling her story. She weeps.

Afghanistan's roadside bombs, suicide attacks and opium production are grave problems that threaten its struggling economy and budding democracy. But a less sensational killer also exacts a deadly toll. One of the biggest dangers to the future of Afghanistan is chronic malnutrition, a perennial plague that contributes to some of the highest infant, childhood and maternal mortality rates in the world.

UNICEF estimates that 210,000 Afghan children under age 5 die each year from easily preventable diseases - that's 575 per day, enough to fill 25 classrooms in the United States. Chronic malnutrition is a leading factor in their deaths, making children susceptible to disease and stunting their growth and mental development, UNICEF officials said.

UNICEF reports show that about 1,600 Afghan women die per 100,000 live births - that's about one woman each half hour. Women whose hips are underdeveloped due to malnutrition suffer increased difficulties in childbirth.

But Afghan officials find at least some hope in an unexpected person from a faraway place - Dr. Steven Kwon of Pasadena.

Kwon, a senior nutrition scientist at Nestle USA in Glendale, has worked for the past three years to grow soybeans in the country through his nonprofit Nutrition Education International ([www.nei-intl.org](http://www.nei-intl.org)).

Kwon says he is dedicated to the project because he was taught to love his neighbor.

"These poor people - widows and orphans - these unfortunate people," said Kwon, who speaks quietly with a Korean accent. "I have a moral obligation to help people who are less fortunate than me. I'm living a blessed life."

Soybeans are rich in protein, which promotes lean muscle growth, strong bones and brain development. In the United States, the world's No. 1 producer of soybeans, the meal from the plants is turned into animal feed. Afghan leaders say exporting soy-based feed to neighboring countries would provide a much-needed boost to the economy.





**TARVING:** The head of 18-month-old Wahida is gently held by her mother as she is observed by doctors at Civilian Hospital in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan, in November. Wahida was being treated for severe malnutrition. (James Carbone/Correspondent)

Officials from three ministries - Agriculture, Public Health and Women's Affairs - recently partnered with NEI to launch the National Soybean Program. In the summer of 2006, farmers will work with NEI to harvest soybeans in every province.

Afghan leaders are hopeful about the soybean's potential.

"If this is implemented, the problem of malnutrition will be solved," said Dr. Massouda Jalal, the current minister of Women's Affairs and a former presidential candidate.

Almost as importantly, the soybean could provide farmers with an alternative to the poppy, the country's most notorious export, Afghan officials said. Afghanistan produces 87 percent of the world's opium from its bountiful poppy harvests. The government and international community are working to reduce dependence on the illicit product.

Mohammad Sharif, Afghanistan's deputy minister of Agriculture, said farmers could grow soybeans in place of poppies, though he says it could never be as profitable as the narcotic. "We look at it as a cash crop," he said of soybeans.

Kwon spends his nights, weekends and vacation time working on the soybean project. He is motivated in part by his personal experience with war. Kwon was 7 when the Korean War ended in 1953. His family was able to eat three meals a day, he said, but he saw many neighbors suffer. Beggars who slept under a nearby railroad trestle came to his door every morning. Friends at school skipped lunch because they lacked food. As a boy, Kwon did not fully understand the cruelty of war. But he knew it made people hungry.

After serving with the Korean army in Vietnam - where he witnessed war's destruction with adult eyes - Kwon immigrated to the United States. He earned his Ph.D., raised a family and rose up the ranks of Nestle to become a senior nutrition scientist. In 2003, a friend doing aid work in Afghanistan invited him there to deliver a nutrition seminar.

There, he saw men barely able to feed their families on \$3 a day, hardly enough to even buy naan, the flat bread that's a staple of the Afghan diet. Children and women, who were not allowed to visit doctors under the Taliban regime, suffered especially.

Kwon recalls weeping and asking himself how he should respond. "I'm a trained nutrition scientist," he said to himself, "and I have lived my life very comfortably. If I do not use my expertise and my heart to serve these people then I will be betraying my obligation as a human being. What should I do? How should I help these people?"

Kwon has overcome numerous obstacles to begin planting the beans.

But even more obstacles await, threatening the project's long-term success.

The most obvious hurdle is the disarray of Afghanistan itself, which is struggling to its feet after 26 years of violence. In Kabul, buildings blasted by bombs and strafed by gunfire stand like sentinels. The country's economy is in tatters, a generation is without education and the Taliban continues its reign of terror - kidnappings, murders and roadside and suicide bombings - in the southern regions.

Kwon has no previous development experience, but he has assembled a team of experts in agriculture, finance and government affairs who contribute to the project. While billions of international aid dollars have been spent in Afghanistan, Kwon and his team have self-financed most of their work. The organization's total expenses have been just over \$150,000, though now they are growing exponentially.

The most urgent need is for funds to buy soybean seeds to ship to Afghanistan for the upcoming summer planting. Kwon wanted to send 600 tons of seed, but he needs to raise \$600,000 to make it happen - and only has about \$10,000 so far. The funds must be raised by Friday to allow time for shipping, he said. The project may be scaled back depending on the funds raised.

Other challenges loom. NEI is cooperating with a government that many say is powerless and corrupt. But while crooked dealing waylays many international projects, no one yet has asked NEI for a bribe, Kwon said. He attributes his good



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fortune to his approach to the Afghan people. Kwon has sought the approval of national and regional Afghan leaders - even those who are corrupt or who grow poppies - by appealing to their patriotism.

His mantra is that soybeans can save the lives of Afghan women and children, and it's well known they are dying. He seeks the permission of Afghan leaders to cooperate with them and serve them - to work together to save lives.

"What we're trying to do is let our nutrition initiative stand on its own," Kwon said. "We're not trying to buy their hearts, we're winning their hearts. That is our approach."

This year, NEI has set a goal of harvesting 20,000 tons of soybeans - though it admits that goal is at risk due to a lack of funds. The five-year plan is to ramp up production so the country is harvesting 210,000 tons of soybeans annually, the amount Kwon estimates is necessary to eliminate malnutrition.

But successfully growing the crops, processing the beans and introducing them to Afghans is an incredibly difficult task. Oval Meyers, an agronomist from the University of Southern Illinois and an NEI consultant, said the project might be moving too fast. Three to five years of trial harvests would be ideal to ensure a crop could be successful in a country, he said.

Meyers points out that soybeans do not have a long history in Afghanistan. They were introduced in 1970 and grew well, but the experiment was stalled by decades of war. NEI successfully harvested an acre in Mazar-e-Sharif in 2004. The organization's 2005 harvest in a dozen provinces was considered a success, but yielded only about two tons of soybeans.

Meyers said there's no certainty that the NEI project will succeed.

"The potential is great, but not without a high element of risk," Meyers said. "But that doesn't mean you shouldn't do it."

Officials from UNICEF also have expressed skepticism about NEI's stated goals, which they deem optimistic to the point of being potentially harmful. Edward Carwardine, head of public information for UNICEF Afghanistan, said there are already high expectations for international work in the country, and Afghan people want to see results. Soybeans are one approach to helping eliminate malnutrition, but they shouldn't be portrayed as the answer, he said.

"If you present it as 'The Solution' then people will be disappointed if they don't see that," he said.

Kwon is not bothered by his critics and is determined to push forward. Waiting for more trial harvests isn't an option when so many people are dying, he said. NEI and the Afghan government are now racing to accomplish their goals. NEI officials and the Ministry of Agriculture are recruiting farmers by the hundreds to grow soybeans this year. Later this month, Kwon will make his eighth trip to Afghanistan to train farmers to harvest the plants.

Mark Henning, the program manager for Joint Development Associates International, an American agriculture development organization in Mazar-e-Sharif, is not involved with the NEI program. He said soybeans have potential, but are such a new crop in the country that it's still unknown whether they will provide farmers with a good yield.

Standing on his land about 10 kilometers west of Mazar-e-Sharif, Nasim Karim, a 28-year-old farmer, said he thinks soybeans are an excellent crop. In 2005, Karim grew several plots of soybeans in partnership with JDA. The soybeans thrived, Karim said.

"Compared to other crops it's good, but the other thing is that there is no market," he said. "What we grow depends on the market."

The market for opium will remain high, Henning said, because it's a fixture of the economy and farmers grow it to survive.



Soybeans can't compare to poppies in terms of profit, he said. But at least they are simple to harvest, unlike the intense labor required to get opiates from the poppies.

Kwon said NEI would serve as the initial market for the soybeans grown by Afghan farmers. NEI will pay farmers about \$266 per acre of soybeans if they have the expected yields. That's more than twice what they would be paid for wheat or cotton, Kwon said.

NEI has an innovative plan to introduce soybeans into the Afghan diet.

Afghans, like most people, are tradition-bound about their meals. So a viable soy-protein source must respect eating habits and be affordable. In November, the NEI team experimented successfully with adding 10 percent soy flour to naan. Every Afghan who tasted the fortified naan said the soy flour did not change its flavor or consistency - but it increased the protein content by 57 percent. Afghans eat naan for every meal and many are so poor it's the primary food they consume.

As NEI hustles to recruit and train farmers, the organization is working in cooperation with the Afghan government to establish factories to process the soybeans into soy flour, oil and meal for animal feed. These factories cost millions of dollars, so Kwon continues his fundraising efforts. He is also connecting with Afghan-American business owners who have pledged their support to help establish the factories.

Kwon is determined to succeed no matter the factors working against him. The project's timetable may be slowed, but Kwon is still optimistic.

"People are hungry there," he said. "People are dying there. They need the nutrition there right now."

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