"THE FOURTH CENTRAL ASIA TRADE FORUM -- GOOD FOR ALMATY, GOOD FOR THE REGION AND GOOD FOR THE WORLD"

This year's Forum will be the biggest ever, bringing approximately 400 entrepreneurs, traders, businessmen, policymakers, diplomats and journalists together from across the region as well as from Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and even countries as far afield as Latvia and Estonia.

USAID has been a strong supporter of this event from the very beginning.  As with previous Forums, the intent is to strengthen ties among and between South Asia and Central Asia, two important regions that were once inextricably linked but in recent decades have grown apart.

The overarching goal of this fourth Forum is to move "From Dialogue to Deals".  Among other things, this formulation underscores the importance of pragmatic approaches as well as concrete results.

Last year's Central Asia Trade Forum provided several examples of outstanding success.  For example, one of last year's attendees was Alisher Abdullajoov, founder of Voolen Teks in Uzbekistan.  As a result of connections that he made in Almaty, his company signed three contracts valued at $2 million -- and more than tripled his production of plasterboard.

We at USAID hope that this year's Forum will result in additional "deals" and many more examples of concrete success.

Our support for the Forum also provides further tangible evidence of the importance that the United States attaches to the "New Silk Road" initiative.  As Deputy Secretary of State Bill Burns recently remarked at an Asian Society conference in New York, Central Asia is "full of economic opportunity and human potential."

As he further emphasized, "Our shared objective is not to supplant the region's vibrant East-West trade connections, but to supplement it and complement them with equally vibrant North-South connections.  We believe that a more interconnected region can serve as a driver of economic development and as an anchor of peace and security."

Kazakhstan too can benefit from these growing connections, maintaining strong ties with existing trade partners even as it reaches out to new ones.

Just as merchants from Central Asia in past centuries pioneered multiple caravan routes in many directions, policies in the present time can be shaped to promote trade, improve economic connectivity and bring diverse peoples closer together.

In particular, customs reform, streamlined and transparent border crossings and new air and land routes will go a long way toward strengthening the economies of individual countries while expanding business opportunities for all of them.

Almaty, a thriving regional center with links to many parts of the world, also benefits when it hosts international events such as the Central Trade Forum, bringing visitors to what for some will be an entirely new city and a previously unfamiliar  part of the world.

As those attending will discover, Almaty is already a world-class metropolis, not only in terms of its air connections but also with respect to its hotels, restaurants, shops, office space, parks, public transportation and tourist amenities.

And, as the upcoming Trade Forum will demonstrate, it is situated at the very heart of Central Asia, placing it in an exceptionally advantageous position to not only promote "dialogue" but also achieve "deals".

Note on author:  Jonathan Addleton is USAID Regional Mission Director for Central Asia.  Previously, he served as US Ambassador to Mongolia, USAID Mission Director to Pakistan and US Senior Civilian Representative to southern Afghanistan.