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Aid to Artisans Comes to Central Asia

Founded in 1976, Aid to Artisans is a non-profit American organization dedicated to create economic opportunities for crafts people and communities around the world. ATA's design and business consultants, volunteers, and an actively involved board of directors combine their efforts to help establish handicraft-based businesses that can enter the global marketplace.

ATA provides design consultation, on-site workshops, business training, and the vital link to markets where the crafts products are sold. Through the efforts of ATA and their many corporate and non-profit associates in many of these projects, needy artisan groups are learning to help themselves and become self-sustaining.

ATA's work in Central Asia is funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). ATA is working within the Counterpart Consortium whose main goal is to support and help the NGO sector in Central Asia. ATA will be with artisan NGOs in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to strengthen their association, increase their members' abilities to profitably produce folk crafts and increase their sales locally and internationally.

The history of Central Asia as a center for art, culture, fine crafts and world-renowned textiles is well documented. The Central Asian people are proud and aware of their traditional production.

Many of the people look to the West for large investments and joint ventures, however, not all of the countries with their varied regions will profit from these forthcoming business ventures. Rural areas are in need of employment, and they are in need of locally produced domestic items. The market place is open to new ideas. As disposable income increases, the local demand for domestic items will increase by those unwilling to produce these items themselves. There are numerous examples of success stories of such cottage production addressing the needs of the

domestic and international market. India, Pakistan, Nepal, Morocco, Indonesia, and world famous Thailand, known for its internationally desired cottage industry produced silk, have all been successful in cottage industry textile production. Central Asia can now be added to the list as the artisans and artisan groups learn new ways to produce and market their products. An ATA representative, Darleen Wilkerson, traveled the three countries where ATA activities will be carried out looking for groups which ATA could work with. She was accompanied in Kyrgyzstan by Center InterBilim's Almash Naizabekova. The two of them, working together, were able to determine a need for

craft-producing NGOs to understand the role they could play in the lives of their community members and to be informed about professional ways with which to go about their role. All of the groups and organizations they met with expressed their desire for guidance in focusing their goals and having input on new methods by which to approach the materialization of these goals.

Of the organizations contacted, some are looking to play an educational and cultural role in the lives of their communities. Other organizations see insuring the continuation of their skills through sales and marketing products as their primary mission, and still others see providing employment and helping the needy as the reason for



ATA Representative Darleen Wilkerson in Kyrgyzstan

existence. Even though the mission statements may differ as well as their level of experience and professionalism, their need for assistance was expressed best by a young woman member of a newly formed NGO, who said: "I have been dreaming of a way to adapt my kurak (traditional patch work) to the modern market, but I do not have the faintest idea where to start. My dreams have been answered. If your organization can help my organization know these things, I know that we both can succeed."