Looming Large: This Persian Rug Should Set a Record
By Daniel Pearl

BEN, Iran -- This is a small town in search of a really big floor.

It should be a bare floor, big enough to accommodate about 6,000 people, with no columns breaking up the space. And it should be crying out for the subtle decorative touch of the world's largest hand-woven carpet, with a third of an acre of beige, brown and blue swirls and flowers.

Working in two shifts in a converted fire station at the top of a hill, 84 women have spent two years on the carpet so far, and it is only half finished. The asking price, yet to be arrived at, could be as high as $1 million. There is nary a buyer in sight.

"I would like to see it in a great exhibition hall -- a big room, where anyone who walked in would say, 'Vuy!' ('Wow!')" says 21-year-old Mehrandokht Aghaie, sitting on a 100-foot-long bench at a huge loom, tying knots with woolen yarn around hanging silk threads and then swiping the excess with a razor blade.

Perhaps a European soccer stadium could put it on display when there isn't a game being played, says Farhad Shams, a sponsor of the project.

It's crazy to make such a big carpet on speculation, says Karim Mirzamani, a Tehran exporter. The market is so bad that for six months he hasn't even been able to get foreign orders for carpets of any size. The U.S., once the biggest market for Persian rugs, is off-limits now because of trade sanctions. Iran's taxes and currency regulations -- and low-wage competition from India, Pakistan and China -- have hurt the rug trade. Persian-carpet exports dropped nearly 35% last year, to $602 million.

Still, Iranians can't stop making carpets. By some estimates, the industry occupies one of every seven Iranians. "People in the villages don't have anything better to do," says Nasrollah Arvarian, 31, a weaver in the village of Sefid-Dasht, down the road from Ben (population 8,000). He has invested his life savings (about $21,000) in two living-room-size rugs that he and his family are weaving at home. His wife, Nargess, who sometimes works through the night, is bug-eyed from staring at tiny knots. "The doctors say I have to stop, but this is my job," she says.

Record Breaker

And certain Iranians can't stop making big carpets. That's the weakness of Elyas Abdi, 47, the designer behind Ben's megarug. He was raised in the rug-trading center of Isfahan. He says the 500 people in his family tree all have been in the carpet trade. His business card reads: "producers of the biggest carpets in the world." He says, "Every time I come up with a big carpet, I have to start another one to break the record." Mr. Abdi says he sold a 6,451-square-foot carpet to a buyer in Dubai. But for two decades his dream has been to weave the ultimate carpet: 50 meters long and 30 meters wide. That is an area of more than 16,000 square feet.
Mr. Abdi says he copyrighted the design, which includes a record-breaking six main flowers. But for years, he couldn't find a carpet trader willing to bankroll the project.

Then he found the Behezisti Foundation. Financed by the government and private-donation boxes, the foundation is a sort of workfare project, Iranian style. It helps get jobs for widows, orphans, and girls who have "gone astray," to keep them on the moral track, according to Siavosh Ahmadi, Behezisti general manager in the city of Shahrekord in western Iran. Actually, he says, "We do not find jobs for them, we create jobs for them." In his region, which includes Ben, that means supporting about 400 carpet-weaving projects. Most girls, and some boys, in Iranian villages know how to weave carpets by the time they reach their teens.

Mr. Abdi says he was sitting with some foundation people, listening to them complain about how hard it is to come up with new job-creation schemes, when he made his pitch for the megarug. He signed a deal with Behezisti in 1995 to provide about $160,000 in start-up funds. A job announcement about the project in Ben's mosque brought a crowd of 250 women to the site, many of them wondering whether the carpet was a joke.

Big rugs do have a history in Iran. In the 1950s, the shah ordered a series of approximately 1,550-square-foot rugs for his palaces. One of them is still on display, under eight dining-room tables in the north Tehran palace, now a museum. "It's the biggest carpet one could ever make," says one of the security guards, who tended the palace before the revolution, too. "I'd bet my eyes on it."

Competing Claims

Bad idea. The Guinness Book of Records lists a 54,000-square-foot carpet made with gold-enriched silk in eighth-century Baghdad as the biggest, though it no longer exists. Oman recently commissioned a very big carpet from Iran for its new Sultan Qaboos Mosque, but it is being woven in four pieces. At the Dubai Shopping Festival, Persian carpet dealer Abdul Rahim Forootan made headlines with his 8,600-square-foot "world's biggest carpet." "It's the biggest on the market," he explains, though the market for megacarpets is so quiet that he never actually had to unfurl the rug.

Handling big carpets takes some muscle. Every six weeks, Mr. Abdi brings in six men from Isfahan to raise the loom so the women, who earn 2 1/2 cents for every 100 knots, or about 50 cents an hour, can keep working at eye level. The yarn and silk threads for the 500-million-knot carpet together weigh seven tons, and the pylons supporting the steel loom are sunk more than 3 feet into the ground. When the carpet is finished, the team will break down the outer wall of the fire station and, with a crane, load the rug onto an 18-wheeler. If he can muster the manpower to unroll it, Mr. Abdi would like to stop and display the completed rug in Ben.

So far, there hasn't been a flood of interest from buyers, the rug's sponsors concede. They say the Red Crescent, Iran's version of the Red Cross, considered buying the carpet to resell for
hard currency with which to buy medicines, but a new director put the kibosh on the plan. The Behezisti Foundation plans to tout the rug at a carpet exhibition in Tehran in September. Its brochure will say the carpet is "the symbol of Iranian people because of their patience, fine work and humbleness."

Big Bug-Catchers

Maybe so, but big carpets are more trouble than they are worth, according to Sefatollah Taghi Khani, curator of Tehran's carpet museum. The museum keeps one of the shah's leftovers in the basement, and airing it once a year takes 15 people, he says. "It's so damn difficult to move, even though it's one of the thinnest carpets ever made." Besides, Mr. Khani says, the bigger the rug, the more chance it will house insects.

Another problem, says Mohammed Reza Hakami, a Tehran carpet dealer: Carpets become more valuable when people have walked on them. That is one reason rug dealers and some buyers will leave their new rugs on the sidewalk for a few days. But "nobody could ever cover such a big carpet."

Besides, "They're cheating when they make the big carpets," says Shoukoufeh Sadeghi, weaving a rug with her three sisters in Sefid-Dasht. She shows how some big-carpet weavers save time by skipping knots, a trick called farsi boff. She says, "It's like machine made. I call it counterfeit."

Mr. Abdi says there is no farsi boff in his rug. He doesn't see why anyone would want to walk on a piece of art. And, as for bugs, he is using tobacco and mothballs to keep them away.

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