

Afghan Diary

Issue 5: April 22nd to May 4th, 2003

From the AP Editorial Desk

Mary returned to Peshawar on April 22, after being evacuated for five weeks. The decision to evacuate Mary was taken by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), which has kindly agreed to provide the administrative support for Mary during her stay in the region. The IRC has no direct input into Mary's actual work with the Afghan Women's Network, which is being jointly managed by the Advocacy Project and the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. In this extract of her diary, Mary recalls her pleasure at returning to Peshawar and finding that the AWN had moved ahead with the ambitious Communications Strategy that she had helped them to devise. She also visits the Kacha Garhi Camp where she confronts, yet again, the dilemma that faces the UN over repatriation. The number of refugees returning to Afghanistan has fallen sharply this year, but UNHCR is under pressure to reduce the refugee population in Pakistan. One solution has been to introduce a new system of iris-scanning, in an effort to deter repatriation "recycling." This occurs when refugees apply to return home and receive a UNHCR grant – only to come back to the camp and try again. While iris-scanning has cut down on the number of bogus repatriation claims, and made life easier in many respects for genuine returnees, Mary expresses some concern that the collection of private data could be misused, and so infringe on the rights of the refugees. Finally, in this extract, she also meets with some of Peshawar's street children who have been rescued from a life of abuse and exploitation by one of the AWN's member organizations.



Left: Mary Moore in Kabul

I returned to Pakistan after being evacuated to Bangkok and was inspired to see how smoothly things were going at the Afghan Women's Network, and how much progress had been made on the initiatives we had started working on together. While I am glad to be back and working with AWN, I am even happier to know that AWN has adapted the

changes made during the first three months of our project (the Media and Communications Strategy). My mission all along has been to empower these women, rather than do the actual work for them. We seem to be achieving our goal!

The drafting of the Afghan Constitution continues to be AWN's primary initiative. The process has reached a new level, which includes appointing the Constitutional Commission. Women are very much a part of the 30-member group, and more input is being sought from AWN and its members.

Indeed, AWN is gaining quite a bit of attention for its work on the Constitution, as illustrated by one significant development. The Interim Government of Afghanistan has agreed to allocate \$100,000 to Afghan women's organizations. Government officials have asked Afifa Azim, Coordinator of AWN, to participate in discussions about how the money is distributed. AWN is carving its niche and making an impact.

Meanwhile, one issue of the AWN magazine, Ertiqa, already had been published and another is on its way to the printer. Editorial meetings have been occurring regularly and it is obvious that more thought is being given to the stories that will appear in the magazine and the cover photo. Several issues of the bi-weekly newsletter have been printed and distributed. The website training sessions are continuing in Peshawar, and AWN staff getting close to maintaining the AWN website on their own. A new round of volunteer journalists – more than AWN can accommodate – will be starting a three-month training session in Peshawar this week.

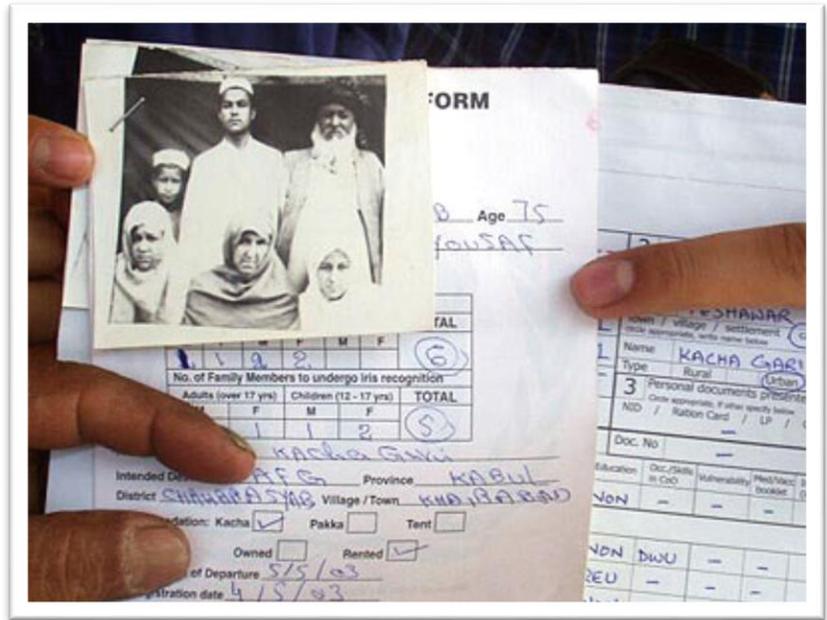
One initiative that I helped draft during my evacuation to Bangkok is a revision of AWN's constitution and a series of recommendations for the management and structure of the network. I am working on this project with Jade, an Australian Volunteer, who is a management consultant for AWN. While AWN has operated strongly since its inception, there are also weaknesses. One example is communications between the Peshawar and Kabul offices of the AWN. I could also mention a lack of clarity in the roles of Coordinator and the members of the Executive Committee. Our recommendations, if adopted, will help AWN become internally streamlined, which is important to donors. A meeting is scheduled later in May so that Jade and I can present our recommendations to the Executive Committee. If the changes are adopted at this meeting, the recommendations will go to the general membership for a vote.

The Eyes Have It – Or How to Prevent Repatriation “Recycling”

I have been exploring UNHCR's repatriation program and changes that the UN has made this year. The UN temporarily halted its repatriation program in December for the winter months, and re-started in March.

UNHCR requires documentation from refugees planning to return home.

The numbers of refugees going back to Afghanistan has fallen this year. In March, 2002, for example 400,000 refugees repatriated, and by the end of 2002, nearly a million Afghans had left Pakistan. This year, in March and April combined, approximately 30,000 refugees have returned home, according to UNHCR figures.



The UN pays the refugees between \$5 and \$50, depending on what region of Afghanistan they are going to, to help them start a new life.

Richard Ndaula, repatriation officer for UNHCR in Peshawar, pointed out that last year, the lion's share of returning refugees were those who had most recently fled – those who left during the U.S.-led war against Afghanistan. This year, UNHCR is working with refugees who have been in Pakistan longer, who have built their lives and who have less to go back to in Afghanistan.



Left: Richard Ndaula

Among them are the refugees who are left in Peshawar's Kacha Garhi Camp, which was scheduled to close in March. The closure was delayed for another year, but even under this pressure still only 9,000 of the 60,000 residents in the camp have chosen to repatriate.

UNHCR and Afghan officials are negotiating with 450 families in the camp who say they are willing to return to

Afghanistan, but only if certain conditions are met – houses, jobs, education, to name a few. “For people to leave here who have been here, they need to know what they are going back to,” Ndaula said.

Most of the refugees with whom I spoke had no idea what they would do upon their return to Afghanistan. Take Zarghoona, 35, as an example. She has been living for 25 years in Pakistan and is repatriating with her husband and nine children. Their home was destroyed years ago, her husband has no job in Afghanistan, and the only money they have will come from the UNHCR relocation fee.

“We have to go back,” said Zarghoona, who said that her 13-year-old daughter died last week. “We have nothing here either. At least Afghanistan is our own country.”

UNHCR’s repatriation process has become more sophisticated this year. The agency has started to use biometrics – iris scans, in particular — to catch Afghans who have made a business out of traveling back and forth over the border specifically to collect UNHCR’s relocation fees. UNHCR, which is supposed to pay the relocation fees just once to each returning refugee, refers to these repeat repatriates as “recyclers.” Until now, UNHCR has had no way of catching them.

In some cases, truck drivers who rent out their services for these cross-border trips, were working out deals with the refugees. They would load up the trucks with props – furniture, suitcases and other personal belongings – and take entire refugee families to a repatriation center in Pakistan. If the family received verification from UNHCR, the truck driver would drive into Afghanistan and take a cut of the fee the family received once they reached their destination.

In an effort to stem the tide of these crisscross travelers between Pakistan and Afghanistan, UNHCR has begun testing the irises of the refugees seeking to repatriate – taking pictures of their eyes and storing the data. Each refugee over the age of 12 is required to undergo the iris scan. Once they are scanned into the system, they are considered by UNHCR as having repatriated.

If a refugee’s iris test come back as a duplicate he or she is denied UNHCR relocation money. UNHCR officials say there has been a 40 percent drop in the number of refugees who are being caught as repeat repatriates – a decrease that UNHCR attributes to a lower number of refugees who are daring to try. “Refugees know there’s no point in trying,” said Ndaula. “They’re too afraid to try.”

The computerized test takes no more than a minute. A refugee sits on a stool in front of what looks like a computer hard drive and positions her eye in the area of the lens, her face about four inches from the machine. The computer snaps four pictures, each picture compared with the other to make sure it is the same eye. The system assigns a number to the iris and the number, not the picture, is stored in the database.

“I’m happy I passed it,” said Freba, 17, who had been living in Pesahwar for six years and was repatriating with seven other family members. “But why should I be nervous? This means I can go to my own country.”

Although the scanning system is capable of keeping personal data about the person who is tested, UNHCR officials told me that the only information being kept on Afghan refugees is the iris identification number. No names, no statistics.

UNHCR has located 20 iris scanners in Pakistan, most of them in Peshawar, and five in Afghanistan. The plan is to move the entire iris-scanning operation to Afghanistan as soon as most refugees have repatriated, which is supposed to happen over the course of three years.

“If they weren’t giving the money, I wouldn’t go through this,” said Sabira, 35, who was going back to Afghanistan with her 6-year-old daughter, Rema, after living for six years in Karachi. “This makes me nervous. But for eight months I haven’t had any money. I hear there is a lot of work making rugs in Northern Afghanistan. I hope I find work in this field.”

A Question of Privacy?

I took the iris test; it is quick and painless. But then, I am accustomed to eye exams. For refugees who do not go to doctors, the test might seem a bit startling.

I took the test twice, to see if I would be caught by the system. I was rejected immediately, the second time I tried. The system is not fool proof. For example, the refugees have already found out that pouring honey in the eye can skew the results and that severe cataracts make the eye inadequate for testing. There is also a margin of error of three percent. Still, UNHCR officials



said the process is much more accurate than the much more informal assessments they conducted last year to determine which refugees truly were repatriating and which ones were not.

Left: Freba, 17, is not afraid to take the iris scan.

The accuracy of the iris scan has allowed UNHCR to scale back on other approaches to verifying returning refugees. Last year, for example, before

UNHCR began iris scanning, refugees went on their own to Voluntary Repatriation Centers, where they would spend up to two days waiting to be verified by UNHCR staff, mainly through photos and interviews. Richard Ndaula said women and children would wait hour after hour, sometimes in the blistering sun, until UNHCR could verify the family.

UNHCR has changed its repatriation program to an appointment-only process. The head of the refugee household now must go to a scheduling center – there are three in Peshawar – with a family photo and schedule a time when the family will go to the iris testing and verification center. The family waits at home until their appointment date, which currently takes between one and three days. Once they are at the iris testing center, they are in and out the same day.

In March and April, UNHCR had been dispatching teams of UN staff to visit refugee families in their homes and verify that family was repatriating. With increases in the numbers of returning refugees, however, the process of home-visits has become unwieldy. And the iris test has proven to be so effective in scaring off refugees who are crisscrossing the border, said UNHCR officials, the ambitious home-visit program became unnecessary.

While UNHCR officials say they are trying to make the process efficient and easier, for one refugee, a widow with four children, the process was anything but. Sabu, 40, told me she lost her UNHCR paperwork on the drive from Lahore to the iris testing center in Peshawar and she asked if I could help her. I spoke with members of UNHCR's repatriation team who were at the testing center, and asked what Sabu could do. One UNHCR staff member told me it would be no problem to call Lahore and verify that Sabu had registered there. Another UNHCR staff member called the head office in Peshawar, asking for guidance. He was told that Sabu would have to repatriate without any verification from UNHCR. Once Sabu arrives in Afghanistan, UNHCR would help her connect with the Lahore office from there.

“We will go to Afghanistan and see what happens” she said. “Maybe here are some foreigners there like you who can help me and make UNHCR understand.”

I was left with questions about the potential uses – or misuses – of the iris scanning system in a population of people who do not know how to go about defending their rights. Iris scans have sparked outrage in the United States among civil libertarians and privacy watchdogs, who argue that such tests pave the way for the government to collect mass amounts of personal data.

In Peshawar, there is no discussion about the privacy rights of refugees or the mass collection of data. Refugees do not think in terms of civil liberties, indeed most of them assume they have no rights at all. Further, the nature of NGO work often requires the violation of privacy – at least compared to what we consider acceptable in the West — in order to provide services, which leaves the privacy rights of refugees as a forgotten concern.

UNHCR plans to move the scanning equipment to Afghanistan in the future, as soon as the majority of refugees return home. If Al Qaeda and international terrorism continue to be a threat to U.S. national security, I question whether the iris scanning system might be co-opted for purposes other than repatriation.

I also was left with questions about why UNHCR would choose a cut-off age of 12-years-old for the iris screen when child trafficking – buying, selling and transporting children across borders — is known to be a major issue in the Afghan community.

The Life of the Child

Right: Khalija, 8, attending class at the Afghan Women's Education Center, Peshawar. She often begs to earn money for her family.

Speaking of children: since I have arrived in Pakistan, I have been wanting to spend time with some of the Afghan street children I see on the side of the road collecting sticks into large sacks and those who are begging almost everywhere I turn. With their sad brown eyes and ragged clothes, these children are some of the most beautiful – and the most tragic – I have ever seen.





Left: Saber, 7, wants to be a driver.

Last week I visited one of AWN's member NGOs – Afghan Women's Education Center (AWEC) – which runs a program for street children. Tucked on a narrow side road in Peshawar, AWEC is a place the children can go to learn primary education skills and basic hygiene. Hundreds of children flock there every day. One group arrives in the morning and the second group in the afternoon.

The morning I went to AWEC, I found nearly 50 children crouched at short wooden desks and working intently. They were scribbling in their notebooks and writing on blackboards, learning how to count and to write the alphabet. They were intent on their work, but I was an interesting distraction – a foreigner with a camera, asking questions. It was clear that the AWEC center provides basic education and helps to place the youngsters in Afghan community schools after one year. It also leaves the children much time for traditional schooling – or time to be just children.

Right: Halima, 11, wants to be a doctor.

I have heard the heartwrenching stories about the life of street children living in Peshawar – forced prostitution, physical and sexual abuse, drug runners. Even those children who are not abused or mistreated are expected to bring home money for the family. Some are as young as seven or eight. Their parents encourage it. They rely on it.



Although I could not prompt the children to talk about any abuse, they were quite open about what life is like for a working child. The amount of responsibility they carry for the survival of the family is quite stark in comparison to the lifestyle of children in Western countries. Even a seven-year-old could tell me the monthly rent on her family's apartment. She was not the only one. And all of the children seemed to know exactly how much they could earn in an eight-hour day compared with a four-hour day.

Each of them went on to some sort of paid work after spending the morning at AWEC. Most of them collected sticks and papers to sell or to bring home for burning in the fire that heats their homes and cooks their food. Fazalmullah, 10, said he sells vegetables. Khalija, 8, said she often begs for change.



Zarghoona is waiting at the Kacha Garhi refugee camp, Peshawar, and would like to return to Afghanistan. She has 9 children.

They talked about the shame of being seen crouching at the side of the road, or dragging a sack filled with sticks. One little girl who said she begs on the street talked about her fear of approaching strangers and cars. She mentioned the time she ran away from one man who got too close.

But they also talked about their dreams, and what they wanted to be when they grow up. In one classroom, nearly every hand shot up when I asked for those who want to be doctors. Several of the girls wanted to be teachers – just like their teachers at AWEC, they said shyly. Saber, 7, wanted to be a driver. Still too small to see over a steering wheel or to touch the gas pedal and brake, he envied the men who could.

None of them talked about jobs or careers as a way to earn more money. They talked about wanting to help their people, the Afghan community. Halima, 11, was one of those who said she wants to be a doctor.

“This is my wish,” she said. “If my wish comes true, I will be one. First, I need an education. Then I will give out medicine to my people.”

Posted by Laura Jones on Oct 12th, 2006