

Afghan Diary

Issue 6: May 8th to 27th, 2003

From the Editorial Desk: Early in May, Mary returned to Kabul. One of her goals was to discover what happens to refugees who return home from Pakistan. As she explains in her latest diary excerpt, many can expect to live in squalid, bombed-out buildings, struggling to survive. During her visit, Mary also sought out a partner organization that could help to train writers from the Afghan Women's Network. The AWN's Communications Unit is starting to produce its own newsletters, but its members need training in how to collect and write articles. Mary succeeded in linking up with the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), a highly professional group that made its name in the Balkans during the 1990s. IWPR's professional trainers have now taken 14 AWN writers into their classes. This means that AWN members are being trained as journalists on both sides of the border. It is empowering for women to be able to express themselves in societies where they have been muzzled for so long, but they still face many obstacles in both countries. The government of the North West Frontier Province in Pakistan has just introduced Islamic Law, and many fear that this will fall heavily on women. In Kabul, Mary attended a meeting to create a new journalists' Union. As she recounts, the meeting was hijacked by political interests, and women were almost completely excluded. The case for a new association representing only women journalists seems very strong indeed.

Aqila lives in a Kabul slum, with her sons Abdullah, 13, Fahza, 5, and Madeena, 4

Homeless in Kabul

When I was visited Kabul in March, I noticed that new houses were not being built and infrastructure projects were not in the works. If Afghanistan truly has been engaged in reconstruction for the past year or more, I wondered, why does Kabul still look a bomb just hit it? Where is the "reconstruction" of Afghanistan that I hear so much about in western media? Much of the housing stock in Kabul is destroyed. Entire neighborhoods are nearly completely razed.



During my second trip to Kabul in May, I decided to explore the housing conditions in Kabul. I had been spending time with refugees in Peshawar, those who are just about to repatriate, trying

to figure out what they will have when they returned to Afghanistan. I discovered that most of the repatriating refugees have no houses in Afghanistan, no jobs, and no plans. No matter, they said. They just want to be in their own country. So where do these people end up living once they arrive?

I am not the only one asking this question. I met several people working with NGO's in Kabul who mentioned the same concern – living conditions and basic infrastructure in Kabul is not improving quickly. Yet UNHCR reports that during March and April of this year, 34 percent of returning refugees repatriated to Kabul. This is the second most popular region of return for refugees; the Nangarhar province has a 37 percent return rate.

During a meeting I had with Jaji Abdul Khaliq, the Afghan Cunsul General in Peshawar, we discussed the issue of housing and infrastructure in Afghanistan. From his point of view, there is no point in pushing repatriation until the situation in Afghanistan improves for returning refugees. Under an agreement between the Afghan and Pakistani government, however, refugees must return to Afghanistan in three years.

“They need homes,” he said. “In order for them to go home, they need homes.”

On a drive around Kabul, I explored one of the bombed out neighborhoods, to see whether people actually are living in these destroyed houses despite the fragility of the foundations and structures. I found that, indeed, these are the conditions to which refugees are returning.



As I drove through the maze of streets in this one neighborhood, I spotted a small open-air shop tucked between buildings. A young boy was tending the store, and a crowd of children hung on the sidewalk outside. I asked the young shopkeeper if he lived in the area. Yes, he said. “Next door.” I asked him if he would show me his house and he quickly agreed, excited by a visit from a foreigner. His name was Abdullah and he was thirteen years old.

Abdullah's mother, Aqila, was as eager as her son to show me around. Ten of them live in two rooms: Abdullah, his brothers and sisters, parents, and grandparents. The house must have been impressive in its day. At one time, army generals lived there, Aqila said. Her family moved in because the house lay vacant and it was in better condition than theirs, which had been completely destroyed by bombing. At least we have a roof and some walls, Aqila said. It is shelter.



Entire pieces of the walls are blown out, bullet holes are seared into the concrete. There is no heat. The water runs through the shaky pipes every two days, if at all. In the United States, this house would be considered ruins and laws would prohibit anyone from going inside. In Kabul, this house was a home.

The family had lived in Peshawar for five years in a refugee camp and had returned to Kabul about a year ago. They own the neighborhood shop where I found Abdullah working. The shop does not bring in much income, Aqila said, but it is the only money they have. Both parents are unemployed.

I asked Aquila if life was better or easier for her family when they were living in a refugee camp. Aqila thought about it for a minute. Well, she said, we did have a health clinic and schools. In Kabul, she added, her children were sick all winter and she could not afford a doctor or medicine.

“My children haven't seen meat here in months,” Aqila said. Yet, even still, Aqila said it is better for the family to be back in Kabul.

“This is our own country,” she said. “I feel happier now.”

Later the same day, as I was driving along the busy main street that leads from the now-vacant King's Palace to the center of Kabul, I passed a building so destroyed by bombing, it was leaning on its side and looked ready to collapse. I asked Masih, the driver and translator who works with me, to stop the car so I could get out and take a look. I could not believe what I saw: people crowded onto the upper floors of the building, some of them peering over the edge as they noticed my car stopping below. This was their home.

Abibullah was one of the men who lived in the building. He met us on the sidewalk outside and, when he noticed our interest, he asked if we wanted to see inside. The tour would come at a price, of course, but I was willing to pay.

He led us up two flights of concrete stairs, most of them crumbled away, to a second floor that was concrete from top to bottom. At least two of the walls were completely gone, including the one facing the main street below. Abibullah and his family had hung sheets of plastic to keep out the wind, but the plastic was about a foot too small on all sides. When I was there, it was a warm and sunny day, but I imagined the painful cold gusts that must have ripped through the plastic during the winter. Similar to Aqila's home, this, too, would be considered a condemned building by Western standards. In the United States, a tall and sturdy chain link fence would be erected around such a shaky structure, to keep children from playing and to keep homeless people from squatting inside.

On the second floor of Abibullah's building, 19 people were living in three rooms: two brothers – Abidullah and Abdurahman – along with their children and wives. The building no longer had running water and there were no bathrooms. The women walked every day across the road and down the street to an empty school building where the water still runs, and carried the jugs home.

The two families had been living illegally in Iran for 20 years, until they were discovered last year and deported back to Afghanistan. The brothers are carpenters, but they had not found any work in Kabul. Life was different in Iran, they said, where there was work and they could afford to rent a house. In Kabul, they told me, there is nothing for them to do.

“We cannot afford the rent of a house here,” said Abdullah, who did most of the talking.

I was shocked by the dangerous conditions in which these people were living, and even more shocked that they were allowed to live like this in full view, on a main Kabul street. Two of the babies had crawled right off the second floor and had fallen onto the busy sidewalk below, both taken to the hospital. The babies survived – barely. And who knows whether the children are brain-injured from their falls. No one asked any questions about how or why these accidents happened?

“We will find out in the future what has really happened to her,” said Afasgul, 22, referring to her one-year-old daughter Gulsoom, who had fallen out of the building. The one-year-old has scars all over the side of her face. “We were so scared.”



Muzzling the Women Journalists

While I was in Kabul, Afghan journalists organized a conference at the Intercontinental Hotel to create and elect the leadership of a national journalism union – not a union in the wage-and-hours sense of the term, but rather a union to protect the freedom of journalists. This

attempt to unionize has been underway since the fall of the Taliban, and the Afghan journalists had been receiving support from the International Federation of Journalists. I have been keeping an eye on the process so that, if such a union effort succeeds, AWN's journalists-in-training will be included.

Unfortunately, the union effort was derailed in the weeks leading up to the conference, split apart by ethnic and political infighting. From what I have been told, journalists aligned with the Northern Alliance usurped the process in order to get elected as many of its own members as possible. An additional problem erupted during the conference, when journalists who were not invited to participate showed up at the door, demanding to be allowed inside. They were refused entry.

The International Federation of Journalists, represented at the conference by several journalists from Australia, pulled out of the process as soon as it became political. President Hamid Karzai, scheduled as a keynote speaker at the event, excused himself from the conference at the last minute. Karzai's deputies said there would be too many security risks involved. (On a side note, this is the second time I have witnessed Karzai's pulling out at the last minute from a high profile, controversial public event. The first was the March 8th International Women's Day event at the Polytechnic Institute, when Karzai was said to have been too ill to appear.)

What struck me the most about the journalism conference was the fact that few women attended. I saw a handful of women – less than a dozen out of 200 or more people in the crowd. One woman – Nooria Ashraf, a professor in the Journalism Department at Kabul University – stood up during a question-and-answer session at the conference and began speaking from the floor. As Ashraf approached the podium to finish her thoughts – she talked about the need to vote for union leaders who did not represent any political or ethnic interests – one of the organizers of the event told her there was no time for random commentaries.

The way this incident transpired, it was clear the men who were running the conference wanted Nooria to keep her mouth shut. Male speaker after male speaker made long-winded speeches and no one reminded them that they needed to hurry up and move along. I talked to some of the women in the hallway, during a break, and they told me they were not surprised. Women do not have a secure place in Afghan journalism, they said, and they certainly had no place in the unionization process. Women are not free in the media world, they said.

“A woman cannot sing a song on television, how can the government say we're free?” asked Sharifa Ikhlas, producer of a program on Afghan television. “They always say women should have rights, but it's only words.”

Right: Miriam Mir, 19, takes part of journalism training for AWN members in Peshawar, Pakistan



Women are not being hired for journalism jobs to match the numbers of them who are being trained or educated as journalists, said Shingay Ghafoorzai, of the National Department of Television.

They rarely are awarded scholarships, she added; most scholarships and coveted training programs are reserved for men.

After witnessing the way women were treated at this conference, it seems a Women's Journalism Association in Afghanistan would make perfect sense- not a union, per se, but an organized body that represents the concerns of women within Afghan media.

Training the AWN Writers

We continue to conduct our own journalism training for women at AWN, both in Kabul and in Peshawar. Putting together the program in Kabul is more of a challenge than in Peshawar because the going rate for trainers is much higher. Some Afghan journalism trainers are asking \$30 an hour. And, so, I am trying to be creative.

In Kabul, AWN has about 14 women who are part of the journalism program. I am hoping that The Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) will be at least part of the solution for getting the AWN reporters in Kabul trained. IWPR hires Dari-speaking editors who work with reporters to complete their stories. IWPR also offer training in writing, interviewing, assertiveness and other core journalism skills. I am asking that AWN reporters go to IWPR with story ideas that will work for AWN's magazine, Ertiqa, to receive assistance in reporting and editing.

In Peshawar, the training program works differently. We have a journalism trainer who goes to the AWN office and trains the women there. The concept is the same as in Kabul: training the women to report and write for AWN's media. We started another three-month training program in May. Most of the young women have no previous training in journalism – many are teachers, some work for NGO members of AWN. Several of our volunteer journalists from the original round of training we provided in Peshawar during February, March and April have published stories in the Ertiqa magazine.

Our media effort has an interesting broadcast element in Kabul, where AWN is producing radio programs and is making plans now for television programs. AWN has an agreement to produce its radio programs through Impacs, a Canadian organization that is creating radio programming and helping to start community radio stations in Afghanistan. AWN currently has about four

radio programs produced, and the plan is to distribute AWN's radio programs to all of Afghanistan's community and state-owned radio stations. We do not know yet whether any of the stations have played the shows we have produced, but we are hoping to start tracking this in the next few weeks. One of the shows AWN is producing highlights aspects of women's rights under the new Afghan Constitution. The other program is called "Women in Focus" – focusing on women's issues in general.

Even as we make progress at AWN in giving women a voice and helping them to attain their freedom, government forces in Pakistan are working for exactly the opposite purpose. I am deeply concerned about the recent decision by the ruling political party in the North West Frontier Province, the MMA, to impose and enforce Sharia Law. Party leaders are keeping the promises they made before last fall's election, when the MMA swept into office. Although news accounts make it clear that part of this new Sharia Law will include a crack-down on any activity considered socially unacceptable, most people I have spoken with do not yet know the full implications of this.

The imposition and enforcement of Sharia Law does not come without some warning. In recent weeks, the MMA has closed down the bar at the Pearl Continental Hotel – the only place that openly served alcohol in Peshawar aside from the American Club (now called the Khyber Club). I have heard that the MMA has banned music in taxis and rickshaws. My concern is how the new Sharia Law will constrain women, including in their dress. Rumors are that women will be required under the new laws to keep their heads and arms covered. Some warn that women will be forced to wear burqas, although such an extreme measure is hard to believe. Regardless, when it comes to women's rights, the NWFP is heading in the wrong direction.

Posted by Laura Jones on Oct 12th, 2006