

Afghan Journal...



Guns for Butter

The SUV comes to a stop in a cloud of thick red Afghan dust. Like a scene from a western movie, as the air clears, the outline of a man emerges. His strong features, graying beard, and large frame create an imposing presence. There is no sign of greeting. Dressed in traditional Afghan *salmar chemise* and *topi*, arms folded across his chest, Sami Khan looks every inch the mujahideen fighter. The interpreter says a few words and we are motioned toward the door of a small machine shop...

I'm asked if I am Muslim; the answer that I am Christian, elicits a suspicious stare. The field coordinator from the International Organization for Migration begins to explain the "Disarmament, Demobilization, & Reintegration" program. "In exchange for the surrender of their weapons, we offer former combatants literacy classes, small business training, and assistance in finding a job or starting their own business".

Sami seems finally ready to talk. "I came down from our commander's headquarters in the mountains to enlist in the army of the new government, but they told me I was too old. All my life I've fought, and now I'm too old?"

A younger man appears from the back of the shop. Less intimidating in size and demeanor, he too looks at me with suspicion. "I started to fight when I was twelve", he says. "It is all I've ever known." IOM has formed a special program for child combatants, many of whom, when the fighting finally stopped, could not remember their families.

These two men, soldiers of competing warlords, were once enemies. They are now business partners.

The DDR program claims responsibility for registration of 14,457 former fighters across Afghanistan, 14,098 have found jobs or received small business grants....



The “Women’s Cinema”

Scaffolding disappears into the darkness of the towering ceiling. The air is thick with the smell of wet concrete and heated metal; soon to be replaced by the aroma of popcorn and perfume.

The Zaenab Cinema in the heart of Kabul is more than just another building under construction; it is a symbol of the re-emergence of women after years of repression.

Located on the park-like grounds of the Women’s Ministry, the once elegant Zaenab “woman’s cinema” was burned into oblivion by the Taliban; only the outer walls were left standing.

As Madame Nooria Banwal, Afghanistan’s Director of Women’s Economic Empowerment, walks onto the construction site the workers part like the Red Sea. She nods graciously to them as she walks into the building. With great pride she points to the stage and the lobby area. “We will do so much more than show films here, she says. We will hold meetings, seminars and exhibitions. This will be a place where women can come to reshape their lives. All of our contracts, for the concessions, the cleaning, everything associated with running and maintaining the theater will be given to women owned businesses.

The theater’s founder would be proud. Princess Zainab Begum was given the land on which the theater stands as a gift from her father, King Muhammad Nadir Khan. Rather than build one more royal household, she created a beautiful theater where, in their segregated society, women could sit quietly in the dark to see how the rest of the world lived.

Now, that world is watching the women of Afghanistan. “It is important that women become empowered, that they start their own businesses, lead their own lives”, says Madame Banwal.

Some countries are betting heavily on the impact of just such empowerment. The red, white, and blue sign prominently displayed on the front of the building, reads, “Reconstruction of this project, provided by the people of America”.....

The Children.... Saving Zarghona



The receiving line at Habiba's Day Care Center looks like they would rather be anywhere else, several seem close to tears. As we approach, from a narrow side street, the stench from the sewage running in the gutters, is making me feel the same way. Those feelings vanish when the children step forward to hand us roses. Our guide sniffs, "Hah, plastic roses from Pakistan".

We've brought gifts from the United States; Crayola crayons and drawing pads. The green and yellow boxes, so familiar to most Americans are completely foreign to this room full of Afghan children. Some even seem afraid. It doesn't take long for the slashes of magenta, purple, and yellow laid upon white paper to bring smiles.

There are no smiles in the wards of the Armed Forces Hospital. Built by the Russian's when they first occupied the country in the early 1970's, its faded façade shows almost as many battle scars as its wounded occupants. The double doors of the women's and children's ward swing open and the occupants rush to cover themselves. In the corner, staring wistfully out the window at a lovely spring day is a little girl of perhaps 10. I make eye contact with her mother, the connection is immediate. I recognize a mother's broken heart when I see it.

"Her name is Zarghona", the doctor says. "She has a genetic heart condition which requires surgery. We don't have the facilities to perform the operation in Afghanistan. The only way she can obtain the treatment is if she leaves the country. Her parents don't have the money for such a trip and there is no government assistance available." "So what is the next step?" "There is none."

I lost another little girl once...her car went off the road and hit a tree. I couldn't save her. But maybe I can save this one.

These stories are excerpted from Pamela Varkony's blog, "Afghan Journal" which has been archived and is no longer available online.