

Afghan youth yearn for peace, justice

Scott Schaeffer-Duffy | Apr. 22, 2011



A young Afghan girl holds her sister at the Aschiana Camp for internally displaced people outside Kabul. On her wrist, the baby has an IV that doctors are leaving in because she has had repeated infections from lack of clean water in the camp. (Photos by Scott Schaeffer-Duffy)

VIEWPOINT

Ten years ago, shortly after the U.S. war began in Afghanistan, my wife, Claire, traveled to Kabul with the human rights organization Global Exchange. She filed several stories on the impact of the American campaign on a nation already weary from years of Soviet occupation, civil war and Taliban rule.

In order to minimize U.S. casualties, the American war was conducted largely from the air, with the ground offensive given over to a collection of warlords lumped together under the more respectable title of "the Northern Alliance."

Despite President Bush's stated goals of rooting out al-Qaida and overthrowing a repressive, anti-woman regime, civilian casualties caused by our airstrikes and by Afghan warlords quickly turned public opinion against the United States. The New York Times famously published photographs of U.S. allies executing unarmed Taliban prisoners. Other outlets regularly published photos of injured civilians. During her trip, Claire accompanied Christiana Olsen, a Massachusetts resident whose sister was killed on 9/11, on visits with Afghan families who had lost loved ones to bombing. Olsen apologized to each of them, saying she never intended her loss to be a justification for more killing.

From March 18 to 24 of this year, as part of a 23-member international peace team, I went to Afghanistan to meet an extraordinary group called the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers.

These brave young people from Bamyan province have each lost family members to the Taliban or the United States, and have concluded that the United States and NATO must leave for war to end. They told us, "Afghans have endured 30 years of war and suffered more than one and half million killed." Like the brave college students in Egypt and elsewhere, the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers have reached out internationally via the Internet, Skype and conference calls. They set up a peace camp last winter in Bamyan in front of the mountain niches that once held the world's largest statues of the Buddha. During our visit, the Afghan Youth organized

the first pacifist march in Kabul and then invited us to join them in planting 52 fruit trees for peace, followed by a candlelight vigil for all the war dead.

The Afghan Youth also introduced us to Afghan leaders in education, law, human rights advocacy and humanitarian relief. All agreed that continued U.S. attacks on civilians, coupled with rampant corruption of the Karzai government, serve only to feed the Taliban resistance. Lena Jahanger, an elementary- and middle-school teacher, told us that donated textbooks from Sweden and the United States ended up for sale in the bazaars. "The distributors do not turn them over for free as they should," she complained.

Zebi Mazoori, director of the Transitional Justice Coordination Group, a coalition of 26 human rights organizations, blamed Gen. David Petraeus for employing and arming untrained militia, who, under a U.S.-sponsored amnesty law, have impunity to murder, rape and rob anyone.



These negative assessments were underscored for us during a visit to the

Aschiana Camp for internally displaced people, where there are more than 10,000 people who live in mud huts and tents after being driven out of Helmand and Khand-har provinces by bombings. We met several amputees, a man who lost his hearing, and a legless man whose eyes had been burned out by the blast from a bomb. We saw obviously malnourished children, the effects of life in a camp without electricity or running water. We heard complaints about organizations promising aid and never returning to deliver it. But most of all, we heard pleas for an end to bombing.

An 18-year-old on crutches told us, "Planes don't care."

One of 12 elders in the camp, Rahamat Rahomi, told us, "Politicians are trying to kill my children. The Taliban is the same. We want to tell all governments to stop killing children." When we asked him what he would say to President Obama, he replied, "Put yourself in our place and think. Stop bomb-ing innocent civilians. You are killing women and children. If someone did this to your children, how would you react?" He said bombings had so terrorized his children that they cringed when a commercial jet flew overhead. Moments later, two helicopters buzzed the camp and we saw his children seek cover.

On the question of U.S. military withdrawal, Afghans were conflicted, with some hoping for greater stability before the departure. But the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers were adamant in calling for an immediate draw-down followed by complete U.S./NATO military withdrawal. Hakim said, "There are 49 countries trying to kill people here." Abdulai said, "If the United States has not brought security in 10 years, why should we hope it would do so in 20? We are so tired of war. We need justice now."

Ghulamai said, "Afghanistan has two enemies, the Taliban and America. If the United States leaves, the Afghan people will find a solution to the other by ourselves." Ali stressed that U.S. apologies and compensation for killing civilians is not enough. He said, "If the United States and NATO kills a member of my family and offers me \$2,000, I will not take it. I will demand they be held accountable!"

I was so impressed with these young people, victims of war, who are facing death threats for their nonviolence.

I am glad for any opportunity to share their message, especially since the U.S. government refused their request for visas to speak here themselves. No matter how often the military fails to deliver on its promises, Americans continue to hope that the next war, the next bombing campaign, will only target bad guys. The Afghan Youth know better. From Kabul to Tripoli, we ought to take heed.

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