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Kathy Kelly from Kabul: A plea for peacemaker visas

by Tom Roberts

NCR Today

Another in a series of reports, probably unlike any others you encounter, by Kathy Kelly and friends, peacemakers undaunted by national borders and war zones.

By Kathy Kelly and Dr. Hakim

August 8, 2012

Two days ago, we spent three anxious hours in an outer waiting area of the ?Non-Immigrant Visa? section of the U.S. consulate here in Kabul, Afghanistan, waiting for our young friends Ali and Abdulhai to return from a sojourn through the inner offices where they were being interviewed for visas to come speak to audiences in the United States.

They are members of the Afghan Peace Volunteers and have been invited to travel with the U.S.-Mexico ?Caravan for Peace? that will be touring the United States later this summer. We didn?t want to see their hopes dashed, and we didn?t want to see this opportunity lost to connect the experiences of poor people around the world suffering from war. The organizers of the Caravan envision and demand alternatives to the failed systems of militarized policing in the terrifyingly violent, seemingly endless U.S.-Mexico drug war. They want to connect with victims of war in Afghanistan especially since, as the top producer of opium and marijuana in the world, Afghanistan has a failing war against drugs as well.

It?s an unprecedented invitation, at a desperately crucial human moment.

A friendly Afghan woman working there as a security guard suggested that the length of the wait might be a good sign - perhaps it meant that one of their interviewers had taken a special interest in our young

friends' case. This was what we'd been hoping for. Ali and Abdulhai each carried packets containing letters of support from four U.S. Senators and three U.S. Congressional Representatives, along with the summary of a petition signed by 4775 people. Maybe some interviewer was taking time to read the letter from Nobel Peace Prize winner Mairead Maguire -- and perhaps Ali and Abdulhai had been given a chance to mention that Mairead would be joining them in Kabul this coming Human Rights Day on December 10th for a campaign calling on 2 million friends worldwide to support a cease-fire mediated by the U.N., silencing the guns of all sides currently fighting in Afghanistan.

The kindly guard, at least, was interested to know more about who the boys were. In snatches of conversation throughout the morning, having little actually to do in the United States' fortress of an embassy, she seemed to welcome a slight relief from boredom.

U.S. soldiers inside an adjacent locked office with opaque windows seemed considerably busier, supervising arrivals and departures of construction equipment and machines. The building project going on is apparently part of a massive expansion of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, targeted to have it surpass the embassy in Iraq's capital, Baghdad, as the largest U.S. Embassy - in the world.

Hoping the best for our two young friends, we were already drafting lines about the worth of friendships of bonds of concern and cooperation built across borders -- starting off our thank-you letter to the thousands who had signed our online petition requesting visas for Ali and Abdulhai.

Throughout the three hour wait, we were intensely curious as to how the interviews were going. How were Ali and Abdulhai conveying everyday life in Kabul's working class --Karte Seh-- district, where they tutor former child street vendors whom they've helped enroll in school? How would they convey the life circumstances of the adult Afghan seamstresses for whom they're now providing machinery, a workplace, and a chance at a livelihood free of exploitation by middlemen? The women converse with each other as they work, their voices soft and animated. Throughout the morning hours, for the hours they can find free, they come in and depart, some with the burka veil covering their faces, but all adamant that among the challenges they all face, with many of them enduring serious abuses at home, none are so great as the burden of feeding their families in the chaos and unavoidable poverty of a society stricken by war.

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To whom, at this moment, were Ali and Abdulhai describing their principled work? Was the interviewer hearing about the scene every weekday afternoon after school, when about two dozen little children spill into the Volunteers' yard, full of life and joy, eager to learn from their volunteer tutors but already needing Ali and Abdulhai's guidance as they act out the deadly prejudices they acquire from adults. Was the interviewer understanding the vital importance of the mission of the Volunteers, seeking and finding creative ways to persuade a panicked nation to find strength in fellowship within and across ethnic lines, Hazara, Pashto, Tajik, Uzbek or many others?

Do the interviewers -- does their supervising agency - even want Afghans to find such fellowship? Do they want to add the authority and prestige that comes with travel to visions like that of the Volunteers, determined that ordinary people can overcome traditional fears and hatreds, living together in mutually supportive community without any need for revenge, without the need for weapons, and without the need for the oversight of foreigners engaged in a military occupation?

Our new friend in the office saw them first. --Here come your friends,-- she said. --Rejected,-- she added, as we looked at their faces. She and another Afghan guard listened sympathetically as Ali and Abdulhai

described their absurdly brief interviews ? they too had spent all but ten minutes of the three hours merely waiting. During those ten minutes, the interviewer had never touched the documents they submitted in their packets.

Abdulhai was informed that he didn't work for the government, that people in Afghanistan didn't know him and that Afghanistan is in a bad situation.?

Ali showed us his rejection letter, and dryly commented that he was sorry they had each spent \$160 US dollars, so needed for their work in their communities, as the purchasing price for this souvenir. It merely stated that they were ineligible to receive visas because they didn't demonstrate sufficient evidence, if allowed to leave Afghanistan, that they would return to their dedicated work here.

The stepwise, methodical work of the U.S. Embassy ? of buttressing, of shoring up U.S. interests (always in the sense of U.S. rule), -- will continue behind its growing walls; employing the tools of militarism, exploiting and rewarding the distasteful work of war profiteers, casting a cold eye on any threats, however fanciful, to U.S. security or U.S. comfort, such as independent, uncontrolled grassroots mobilization for peace among ordinary Afghans.

Meanwhile in small ways, real strength asserts itself - in small work, repeated a thousand fold, by people like the Afghan Peace Volunteers ? in tutoring a crowd of children, in helping a desperate mother win the right to feed her family, in calling on worldwide solidarity behind a U.N.-imposed ceasefire for the U.S. and Taliban - in small actions we invite the world to emulate the torrent that erodes walls, - the small acts that together make up the meaning of a life, with which we build an alternative to the lie of exceptionalism, the lie of security, the lie of violence.

Right now, those eager to serve the vision of a peaceful Afghanistan are invited to repeat our victory last month when we turned around the visa rejection for Hakim. We had hesitated, this past week, to flood the embassy with letters supporting Ali and Abdulhai - but that hesitation is no longer needed. We urge the thousands who believe in the Afghan Peace Volunteers' vision and practice to take simple supportive steps right now, by writing letters, such as can be found at http://act.rootsaction.org/p/dia/action/public/?action_KEY=6447 to the addresses listed there.

Our small steps, together, help us abandon the lie that we can't make a difference. Inside the U.S. Embassy, behind blinding walls and distorting cameras, perhaps officials can't see what we're doing - they certainly don't seem to see what they are doing - but we can make ourselves manifest to one another. We have the imagination and the hope to build small things that will become great in their proper time. To build the right things. To see the connections between us growing strong.

So this is that thank you note we were writing in the event that visas had been approved for Ali and Abdulhai. We haven't yet secured a visa for these young men, or won them their right to ride with the Caravan of Peace. It is possible that we won't. But we want to thank you nonetheless, expanding our humble thanks for those who have already helped us, to encompass everyone around us who is taking their part, in ways we cannot see, to build the world that is coming. Thank you. We haven't succeeded yet, and yet "we succeeded beyond their wildest imaginings" - the imaginings of those fettered by the embassy's walls and the walls of the government directing it. We're still outside, here with the world that's arriving.

We can't wait to build a better world, a world of friends without borders, and Ali and Abdulhai give us yet another dignified reason to explain why Afghanistan can't wait.

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