

VOICES FOR CREATIVE NONVIOLENCE

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Dear Friends,

At year's end, many friends and colleagues send us "year in review" letters.

Here at Voices we've been reviewing two decades of collective efforts to challenge U.S. military and economic warfare. January 15, 2011 will mark the 20th year since the U.S. Desert Storm attack on Iraq. Iraqi people continue to endure hunger, bereavement, displacement, and fear. Many in our network, people from Iraq and from the U.S., try mightily to assist individuals and families that have been devastated and displaced by war.

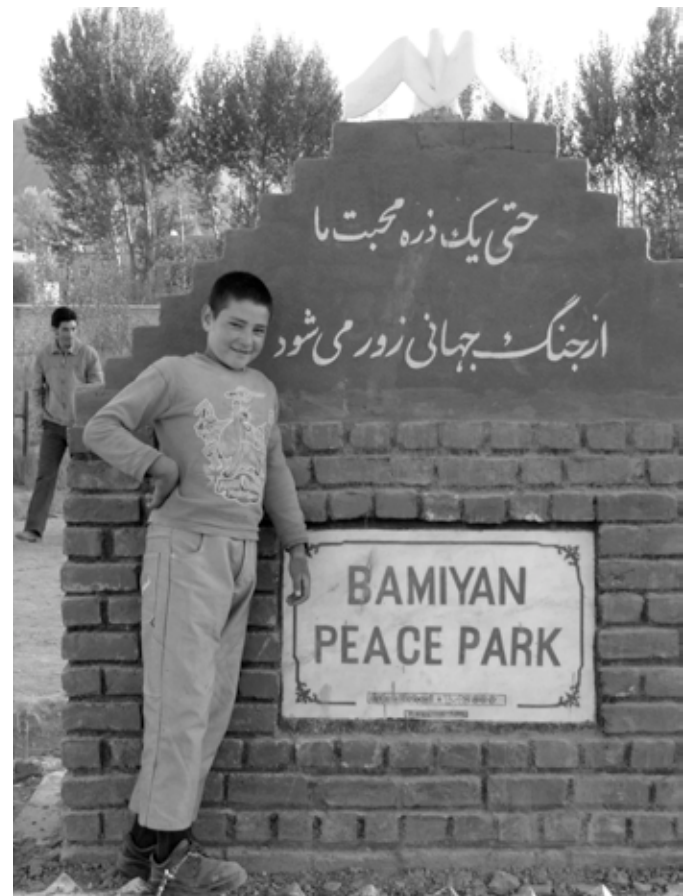
Although it's of little comfort to those who have lost loved ones during the wars in Iraq, we think it's nevertheless important to note that in the months leading up to the 2003 U.S. Shock and Awe bombing, the world came closer than ever before to stopping a war before it started. Millions of people were mobilized to campaign against the U.S. invasion.

In the past two years, wanting to help raise awareness about the affliction caused by U.S. warfare in Afghanistan and U.S. drone attacks on Pakistan, we have experimented with sending small delegations to those countries. Three Voices delegations have traveled to the region and one of our volunteers, Mary Dean, visited Iran with an FOR delegation in November. Upon return, Mary compared notes with Kathy Kelly, Jerica Arents and David Smith-Ferri, who had returned from Afghanistan. They noted a disparity between the two countries in availability of electricity, clean water, and navigable roads. Both countries face deplorable human rights situations, but in Afghanistan, where the U.S. occupation has now outlasted that of the Soviet Union, hardships are exacerbated because people lack food security, electrical power, clean water, health care and education.

"U.N. Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Catherine Bragg said some 7.4 million Afghans were living with hunger and fear of starvation, millions

more rely on food help and one in five children die before the age of five."

--Michelle Nichols, Reuters, December 4, 2010



In early December, seven activists flew to Afghanistan for a three week visit. While there, they will collaborate with the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers, a group of teenagers based in Bamiyan, who campaign mightily to promote nonviolence and help people beyond their borders empathize with the suffering endured by people in Afghanistan. For example, the youngsters sold home-made potato chips in the local bazaar to raise money which they used to purchase a large strip of leather. Next, they created leather cell phone pouches, inscribed them with the Dari word for Peace, "Sah," and gave them as gifts to youngsters in a neighboring province.

Throughout their lives, most youngsters in Bamiyan are told that the people in the neighboring province are their enemies. “We can’t believe you did this for us!” exclaimed the youngsters who received the gifts.

The Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers have helped us grasp what it is like to live in a country afflicted by 30 years of warfare. They help us understand, at least minimally, the meaning of “hamdard,” a Dari word for “shared pain.” We’ve admired their determination to form community in spite of diminishing hopes for an end to the violence surrounding them. They also help each other bear losses and hardships. Yet, as visitors, we have been fortunate to share the joy of new friendship with these youngsters and their families.



Delegation reports, along with photos, you tube links, and several of David Smith-Ferri’s riveting poems, written while in Afghanistan, are posted on dozens of websites, including www.vcnv.org, and have been picked up by various publications.

The outreach accomplished by delegations and their support communities can help, significantly, to bolster public opposition to ongoing war in Afghanistan. For those who can manage a financial contribution, we’ll welcome your assistance in funding these delegations. Jerica Arents, David Smith-Ferri and Kathy Kelly, who traveled to Afghanistan from October 11 – November 1,

are readily available to speak in your community. The same will be true for members of the December delegation: Mike Ferner, Brian Terrell, Farah Mokhtareiazadeh, Eric Stoner, Leila Zand, Ann Wright and Kathy Kelly are members of the December delegation.

From January 11th – 22nd, 2011, several Voices activists will fast, in Washington D.C., with the Witness Against Torture campaign, calling for release of detainees held without trial in Guantanamo and Bagram, closure of Guantanamo, and an end to torture.

January 27th marks the date when Judge Jansen, in Las Vegas, Nevada, will deliver a verdict to the Creech 14. After listening to expert witness testimony from Ramsey Clark, Bill Quigley and Ann Wright, the judge decided that he needed at least three months to study the issues raised regarding charges of trespass and the defendants’ claim that they were exercising their rights and responsibilities to prevent the illegal use of drones for targeted, extrajudicial assassination. Tom Palumbo has turned the transcript of the trial into a one-act play—we eagerly await the conclusion.

Last year, in early January, Mohamed Abdel-Magid, a Sudanese student, finished his degree at the Univ. of Minnesota and joined us, first in Washington, D.C. and then in Chicago, as a full-time volunteer. Sadly, for us, he must return to Minnesota in order to pursue graduate studies. He has been one of the finest educators we’ve ever encountered. Josh Brollier is finishing up a six-month course of language study in Syria. He’ll join the small but growing group of activists who’ve made significant headway in learning Arabic. We also wish him well as he heads to nursing school in Memphis, Tennessee.

Thank you for all that you have done and will do to help end the scourge of warfare. And thank you for whatever contributions you can make toward ending drone warfare, ending U.S. warfare against Afghanistan and Pakistan, ending torture and linking with people determined to build a better world.

Voices For Creative Nonviolence
Kathy Kelly, Gerald Paoli, Mary Dean, Mohamed Abdel-Magid, Joshua Brollier, Jerica Arents, Tom Palumbo, and Jewell Gregory

Open Letter from Afghan Youth By Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers



The Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers (AYPV) range in age from eight to twenty-two, and have been active for over two years, translating their camaraderie and the horror of their families' experience of war into a passionate and active pacifism. Like almost everyone living in Afghanistan, they have lost family members to violence, their families have been attacked and displaced, and they find the threat of future attacks real and frightening. And yet, taking courage and strength from each other, they aren't letting violence define them.

Their activities include the transformation of a rock-strewn, abandoned lot into an attractive, landscaped Peace Park, an effort that took two and a half years and required them to overcome sizable bureaucratic hurdles and withstand public derision and even threats. Now they reach out to youth in other parts of Afghanistan, looking to broaden their impact and diversify their makeup. They have participated in fasts organized by U.S. activists against torture, and they are currently seeking an opportunity to come to the United States to speak about their experiences and build bridges of friendship with people here.

This is a message from them to all the world leaders.

Dear Mr. Obama, Mrs. Clinton, Mr. Petraeus, Mr. Rasmussen, and all our world leaders,

We are Afghans and we ask the world to listen.

Like yourselves, we couldn't live without the love of our family and friends.

We were hurt by your criticism of Mr. Karzai for voicing the people's anguished pleas, "Stop your night raids."

Please, stop your night raids.

If you could listen, you would have heard 29 NGOs in Afghanistan describe how we now have "Nowhere to Turn".

Read the full report [Nowhere to Turn: The failure to protect civilians in Afghanistan](#) at OXFAM.org

If you could listen, you would also have heard Mr. Karzai and the 29 NGOs express concern over your Afghan Local Police plan; the world will henceforth watch our militia killing the people, your people and our people, with your weapons and your money.

If you could listen, you would have heard the sound of your drones crystallizing the nights of hatred among the Afghan, Pakistani and global masses.

Instead, we hear your determination to 'awe, shock and firepower' us with Abrams tanks. We hear distant excitement over your new smart XM25 toy, a weapon you proudly proclaim will leave us with 'nowhere to hide'.

Nowhere to turn and nowhere to hide.

Your actions have unfortunately dimmed our hopes that the people could turn to you. Along with our Afghan war-makers, you are making the people cry.

Yet, we understand. You are in the same trap we're in, in a corrupt, militarized mania.

Love is how we're asking for peace, a love that listens, and reconciles.

And so, we invite you to listen to the people of Afghanistan and to world public opinion on the Global Day of Listening to Afghans, to be internet-broadcast from Kabul this December.

It is time to listen broadly and deeply to both local and overseas Afghan civil groups and the numerous alternative solutions they have proposed for building a better socio-political, economic and religious/ideological future for Afghanistan.

We have shared the pain of our American friends who lost loved ones on September 11, by speaking with and listening to them.

Though, if the world could listen like these American friends did, the world would know that few Afghans have even heard about September 11 and that no Afghans were among the 19 hijackers. The world would have heard our yearnings as we were punished over the past 9 years.

If the world could listen, they would know how much we detest the violence of the Taliban, our warlords, any warlord, or any bullet-digging finger-trophy troops.

And now, for at least another four more years, we will grieve over souls who you are unwilling to 'count' and we are unwilling to lose.

It is extra painful to us and to your troops because clearly, there are non-violent and just alternatives.

We understand the pain of financial hardships but try telling an Afghan mother about to lose her child or a soldier about to take his life that the only way their illiterate and angry voices can ruffle the posh feathers of our world leaders is when it disturbs not their human or truth deficit, but their trillion dollar economic deficits. How do we explain that without denuding ourselves of human love and dignity?

What more can we say?

How else can we and our loved ones survive?

How can we survive with hearts panicking in disappointment while perpetually fleeing and facing a 'total' global war, a war that wouldn't be questioned even in the crude face of a thousand leaks?

We would survive in poverty, we may survive in hunger, but how can we survive without the hope that Man is capable of something better?

We sincerely wish you the best in your lives.

We are Afghans and we ask the world to listen.

بشانه سلامت

Salamat bAsheen!

Be at peace!

Meekly with respect,

The Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers

The Women's Harvest

by Jerica Arents

Kabul, Afghanistan - After a week visiting Bamiyan, a rural Afghan Province, one thing has been made abundantly clear to me: the experience of being a woman in this country is much different than being a woman in the United States. Here, the inescapable and indelible fact of gender colors social interactions, far more so than back home. But being a woman has also created safe spaces of inclusion within the village's maternal system, from which I would have otherwise been kept at a distance.

Time and time again, after meeting with the men in the family, I was led into a separate room to visit with the women, who had gathered there and were waiting eagerly for us with their children. Immediately, an exchange began, a series of greetings, smiles, thanksgivings, and comments about the style of my clothes, quality of my hands, or strangeness of my backpack. Daughters and granddaughters would join us,

children at their feet, each little face more beautiful than the last.



When we met with women and men together, the men tended to be the focal point, dominating the conversation. In the absence of their male counterparts, the women, adorned in vibrant cloths, filled the sparsely furnished rooms with stories and laughter. In this conservative Afghan village, one woman shared with us the heartbreaking experience of having her husband kidnapped and killed by the Taliban - and raising her kids, now teenagers, without the breadwinner of the house. She looked down at her wrinkled hands and paused before telling us of her struggles with depression. "We age so quickly here" she reflected, looking up at me, circles under her eyes. Her skin was weathered and worn, bearing the years of harsh living conditions and inadequate nutrition. I would have guessed she was in her late 50s - she is in fact only 38.

A doctor who has been living in rural Afghanistan for eight years spoke with us about the medical realities these women have to face - lives burdened with the physical manifestations of the recollections of war. They have developed strong coping mechanisms to handle the severe headaches, depression, and anemia that plague their daily lives.

While sitting alone with Afghan women, we learned much about their way of life and the disappointments they share as a result of living in an occupied land.

While in the past, village women were married around 13, many now marry at 19 or 20 and then move in with their husband's family. Nasreen, a young woman who was recently married, told us of her "half happy, half sad" feelings of leaving her family for an arranged marriage in a neighboring village. The women only leave their village once a year and then only to go to the market; they make this trip clad in full burqas. For generations, these women have been identified by the existence of their children, spending their time tending to the needs of their large families in a pastoral culture. "We are all illiterate", said the 38-year-old mother, "so we harvest potatoes."

However, three of the young women we met now go to school and revealed to us in English their hopes to become doctors. Their mothers and aunts looked on, smiling. All of the women think things will be better with an education. And as we asked about the war, it was clear that memories of fleeing from the Taliban rushed into the room. But the women certainly did not communicate their favor with the ongoing U.S. and NATO occupations of their country.

"It's all rhetoric and words that America is defending the rights of women", said an articulate young woman named Zerghuna. With women and children dying daily not only from being caught in the crossfire, but also from the effects of poverty, malnutrition, and lack of available health care, they are skeptical about the justifications used by foreign forces around women's rights. Zerghuna wishes that the world would see to it that the efforts to improve the rights of women were actually implemented, and that the billions of dollars allocated to aid organizations would reach the intended recipients – the poor. "They should come here and see that something happens, because nothing does."

When asked about the system of government in Afghanistan and what they would request of it, the women asked for a few more hours of electricity a night. Other than that? "Help us find good, dignified work to take care of our families", said one of the mothers. The others nodded in agreement.

Planting the Seeds in Afghanistan

By Kathy Kelly

Nur Agha Akbari and his family live in Kabul, on an unpaved, pitted street lined by mud brick homes. When we visited him this week, his oldest son, age 13, led us to a sitting room inside their rented two-story apartment, furnished with simple mats and pillows. The youngster

smiled shyly as he served us tea. Then his father entered the room.

Mr. Akbari is a robust, energetic, well educated man from a respected, academic Afghan family. In the late 1970s, Nur had gone to study agriculture in the UK and remained there, becoming an organic farmer. His four brothers had instead remained in Afghanistan, or else returned there after studies abroad. His two eldest brothers had trained in the Soviet Union - one as an engineer, one as a nuclear scientist - and had received early warning of the likelihood of what came to be the 1979 Soviet invasion. They spoke out publicly about their fears as the invasion grew more and more imminent.

On December 27 of that year, Soviet troops occupied major government, media and military buildings in Kabul, initiating a nine-year war between a nationalist/fundamentalist resistance (the "Mujahideen") and the Soviet occupiers. Soviet officials fired Nur's oldest brother from his cancer research work at Kabul University and blacklisted him. He found himself unable to work, and soon joined the resistance. Nur doesn't know much about what happened to him then, but he was among thousands of people bulldozed into mass graves after capture and execution by the Soviets. All told Nur knows very little about the fates of his three older brothers, all killed in the war. But their tragedy would largely shape his life.

Nur had arranged for his surviving, younger, brother to join him in the UK. But Nur would lie awake at night, thinking about the children and the wives of his slain brothers. Concerned that his nephews and nieces were now fending for themselves in Afghanistan's war zones, fatherless and penniless, he resolved to return home.

When he learned of a job with an Austrian relief agency, which would have him living in Pakistan but taking three trips per year into Afghanistan, he immediately applied. A representative of the "Austrian Relief Group" recognized Nur's family name and told him it would be exceedingly dangerous for him to enter Afghanistan, but Nur persisted, realizing this was perhaps his only chance to rescue his widowed and orphaned family there. He got the job and swiftly set up residence in the Pakistani city of Peshawar where, eventually, he managed to gather all of his brothers' children and wives in a large house he had rented. At last he could be sure that they had health care, adequate food, and access to education. He worked tirelessly to make this possible.

Now, at family reunions, they remember those hard times. The youngsters who were saved by their young uncle are themselves parents now, and the family history

includes great gratitude for the sacrifices Nur made, as a young man, to provide for and encourage his large extended family.

His is among thousands of stories of hardship and tragedy, many worse than his own, as he made sure repeatedly to remind us several times in the course of relating it. Stories of death and dislocation from the superpower invasion of 1979, and now from the American occupation, entering its tenth year. Now Nur works as an engineer for the Afghan government's Department of Agriculture, with many more people to try to help rescue. He talked to us about the problems besetting Afghanistan as it attempts to rebuild from an ongoing war.

Nur is a visionary. He imagines communities learning to provide for themselves and solving problems using local decision-making and initiative at a grass roots level. He is passionately committed to a model of community development which he had begun to implement in the Panjshir Province. "We need to sow seeds," he says. "Germination takes time. It's not like building a wall which you can just slap up." But he has hit impasse after impasse in his efforts to foster grassroots community development, with many different forms of corruption everywhere springing up to commandeer the funds the occupation has made available for development work.

Our delegation has heard a lot about rising and pervasive corruption over the past two weeks traveling in Afghanistan. Following the election of Mr. Karzai, people we've spoken with were stung by the congratulatory calls from heads of state around the world, including that of President Obama. Already outraged over what they (and international observers) consider an extremely fraudulent election, they feel bewildered by other world governments' legitimization of corruption in their capital. By supporting the current government, the U.S. exacerbates the life-choking corruption here. Afghan Member of Parliament, Ramazan Bashar Dost, urged us to ask the U.S. government to realize this, and desist. A young woman running her own company in Kandahar province spoke to us with contempt about corrupt officials. And others - an Afghan human rights lawyer, the co-founder of a large media company, three fellows working for a smaller news agency, along with almost every Bamiyan villager we met during a week there - all spoke of how the corruption had negatively, in cases disastrously, impacted their efforts to make a living and contribute toward their country's resurrection from its current, dreadful state.

One of the most egregious examples has been set by the United States. According to a McClatchy report released

on October 27, 2010, the U.S. government knows it has awarded nearly \$18 billion in contracts for rebuilding Afghanistan over the past three years, but it can't account for any of the billions spent before 2007. What's more, a crucial agency of government investigators and auditors - those responsible for the SIGAR, the "Special Inspector General in Afghanistan Report," on waste, fraud, and abuse of American taxpayer dollars - has now received a failing grade in a new government investigation of corruption in their own activities.

Nur wonders where all the money has gone. "If we spent one quarter of one quarter of one quarter of the billions that they've spent, we could fund this process of community development," he assures us. "Billions have been spent and we have nothing for it. If we had followed a process marked by transparency, fairness and involvement of local communities, we could have turned this country around in five years."

Beyond lamenting lost opportunities and lost lives in the dangerously impoverished Afghan economy, he mainly fears that ordinary Afghans will increasingly adjust to a welfare culture which relies on handouts rather than hard work to achieve progress.

As we spoke with Nur, his son returned to the room with a rich, creamy soup prepared by his mother and then left and returned again with platters, one per guest, each heaped with walnuts, glazed dried apricots and luscious pomegranate seeds. When we praised the quality of this truly delicious fare, Nur (with a wry smile) replied, "We spend many days trying to export these good fruits. By the time we finish crossing bureaucratic hurdles and filling out many sets of papers, arranging transportation, getting approval, and negotiating prices, the fruit often rots. But, if you have a truckload of opium, you can send it to the other side of the world in one day."

Nevertheless, Nur continues working toward a better future for Afghanistan. He holds on to a deep faith in the ability of the simplest people to generate solutions to their problems if they are liberated from the oppressive effects of war and corruption. This is no time for a loss of nerve. Nur Agha Akbari, a survivor and a creative thinker, may not reap the harvest in his lifetime, but he won't stop planting the seeds.

Something to Say: Survivors of a U.S. Military Attack Speak Out

David Smith Ferri

November 2010

We have something to say.

We were there when the 'Apache' helicopters tracked
our three-vehicle convoy,
when they closed in and attacked,
unleashing their fanged weaponry,
and killing people in the lead truck,
turning it into a heap of mangled steel,
when the missiles, like wild dogs, tore at their bodies,
dragging pieces away and into the bushes to gnaw on.

We have something to say.
We were there when women and children in the next car
opened their doors and stepped outside.

We were there when they looked up
and women waved their head scarves,
signaling Civilians! and Don't shoot! and Call for help!

We were sitting there
in horror
in the third vehicle
when the helicopters unleashed another missile
shredding the scarves and the hands that held them.

We have something to ask people in the U.S.
Do you think we are animals
to be hunted and killed?
Did the murder of our sisters and brothers and children
cause even a ripple
in the smooth pool of your conscience,
even a small interruption
in your routine,
in your pursuits?

We have something to say to the generals
and colonels and captains.
Words that survived in the smoke and rubble.
A few short sentences we found
while looking for the pieces of our family members,
while burying them.
Leave Afghanistan.
Dismantle your machines
and go home.



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Jerica Arents, Kathy Kelly
and David Smith Ferri in
Bamiyan, Afghanistan with
the Afghan Youth Peace
Volunteers.

December, 2010
Newsletter

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