

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



December 30, 2014

Forgotten Women

Gold jewelry, tights and expensive jeans are being sold in bright stores and luxury plazas. A large poster of a woman in a mini-skirt hugging a man is plastered outside a shoe store while music blares from the mall's speakers. But outside, just around the corner, women are begging on the streets. They are the hidden face of modern Kabul.

Walking the streets of Kabul under a full burqa, the traditional garment that the Taliban insisted that women wear and which many still do, it is possible to gain access to Afghanistan's forgotten women.

There are two million war widows in Afghanistan, and their plight is easy to forget in capital, where Western-style shopping malls, bars and French restaurants are opening up for wealthy foreign aid workers and Afghan expatriates.

There is no social security system in Afghanistan. Widows are not provided pensions or housing so there is no safety net for them to fall back on. In other Muslim countries, getting remarried can resolve the economic problems of widows. But in Afghanistan's that is not so. Most Afghan men do not want to bring up children from a previous marriage. 'Beneath the Veil' uncovers the plight of Afghan woman. In this film - however it has been recorder some years ago yet the same condition exists - journalist Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy returns to Afghanistan to find out how life has changed for Afghan women since the invasion by America and its allies and to investigate whether women have been 'liberated'. Her journey takes her from the bustling city of Kabul - one vast building site full of shopping malls and warlord palaces - to Herat on the Iranian border, where suicide rates for women are shockingly high, and on to the remote rural areas in the north where Afghan life is at its most basic. Kabul has become the showcase for women's rights in Afghanistan - its burgeoning beauty businesses and shops touted as evidence of their freedom. But Sharmeen discovers that life has only changed for a privileged few. Just streets away from one shopping mall she finds homeless women wearing burqas forced to beg and steal to feed their children.

Sharmeen is taken by one woman to her home - a bombed-out block of flats in Western Kabul, an area rarely visited by Western journalists. Here she explains how her husband was killed in the invasion forcing her to beg to ensure her daughters' survival. This woman is just one of an estimated two million widows in a country where women are dependent on men.

To begin to get an idea about what women like her face every day, Sharmeen wears a full burqa and a secret camera and joins her on the streets. She records the reactions of the men passing by and how women are still made to feel like second-class citizens. Sharmeen travels to a burns unit at a hospital in the Western province of Herat to investigate the growing number of self-immolation cases. She meets patients and doctors and discovers that for many women facing domestic violence, rape and forced marriages suicide is the only means of escape. But for survivors, the stigma attached to suicide mean many of them claim the burns were an accident as their families seek to conceal it. In one moving interview, a girl of 12 tells Sharmeen how she was sold by her opiate-addicted father to her future husband at the age of seven - she burnt herself from the waist down when she became old enough to know what her fate was.

In Taloqan, in the far north, Sharmeen visits a maternity ward at a hospital to find out why the country has the second highest infant mortality rate in the world. She meets female doctors who explain that women need their male guardian's written permission to go to hospital - which is often difficult to obtain and finds that many women have little or no access to basic prenatal and postnatal care so childbirth can often signal a death sentence for a mother and her baby. Promised western aid to modernize the hospital has never materialized.

Sharmeen then travels to the remote province of Takhar to visit a girl's school which appears to offer some hope. Whereas under the Taliban the girls had to be taught in secret, the headmistress can now hold classes in the open and many of the girls are unveiled. However Sharmeen soon discovers that their enthusiasm for education is not shared by their fathers and their employment prospects are bleak. Throughout her journey, Sharmeen finds little evidence of Western aid making a difference to the lives of women. The streets of Kabul are full of aid workers in flash 'four by fours', but the lives of ordinary people have hardly changed.

Sharmeen concludes that the liberation of Afghan women is mostly theoretical: it was naive to think that the country could be transformed quickly, when the oppression of women was the consequence of centuries of tribal and cultural practice - not the sole invention of the Taliban. The West should be asking hard questions about where all the millions of aid money have gone, with so little to show.

Kazakhstan - The Heaven of Interfaith and Interethnic Harmony

The Republic of Kazakhstan is one of a few countries in post-Soviet territories that managed to avoid interethnic clashes and conflicts in the period of USSR's final crisis and its eventual breakup. Kazakhstan's experience of peacefully forming of multicultural policies can be extremely useful for developing and developed countries alike. After the Soviet Union had collapsed, all of its former countries experienced a burst of ethnical self-identity. The burst was accompanied by a wave of hostility towards the former "big brother" - the Russian-speaking population. This caused a massive outflow of Russians living elsewhere to Russian Federation, their home country. Many ethnical groups (Germans and Poles among them) feared repressions so fled their Soviet homes to go to their native lands. Kazakhstan was, perhaps, the only exception. Regardless of the initial population outflow, many of those who left came back to Kazakhstan appealed by its policy of multiculturalism.

Up to this day Russian language plays a great role of an interethnic language in Kazakhstan - almost half of the population still does not speak Kazakh, the country's official language. However, the official language is not being enforced harshly over people, the government gradually implements it into the public consciousness by actively teaching it in schools and universities.

Thus almost 90% of graduates today have knowledge of Kazakh that is sufficient for everyday communication and holding positions in the public service, a sphere where Kazakh language became mandatory just a few years ago. According to the governmental programme, 95% of the population will speak Kazakh at the level of everyday communication by 2020. To assist that goal, numerous Kazakh language centres (most of which are free or very cheap to attend) are being introduced everywhere in the country. The languages and cultures of the more than 140 nationalities that inhabit Kazakhstan are being freely developed along with the traditional Kazakh culture. The representatives of different ethnoses residing in Kazakhstan are presented in an organization that is unique in its importance - the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan. Today it is an advisory-deliberative structure under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. APK's main goal is the realization of the government's ethnical policies, providing socio-political stability in the country and improving the efficiency of cooperation between state and civil institutions in the field of interethnic relations.

Furthermore, 9 representatives from the Assembly, chosen at the organization's congress meeting, are appointed MPs in the Parliament's Lower Chamber, majilis. This is done to prevent monopolization of Parliament by just one ethnicity and safeguard the opportunity to represent the interests of various ethnic groups of Kazakhstan's population. The Assembly supports the publishing of newspapers and magazines in 15 languages, radio broadcasting in 8 languages, and TV transmission in 7 languages. There are 88 schools in Kazakhstan in which the students are taught in Uzbek, Tajik, Uighur, or Ukrainian languages. In 108 schools across the country the languages of 22 Kazakhstani ethnicities are being taught as a separate subject. There are also 195 specialized language centres where children and adults alike can learn the languages of 30 of Kazakhstan's ethnic groups. Besides Russian and Kazakh theatres, there are four more national theatres - Uzbek, Uighur, Korean, and German.

Every year several dozen books are published in the languages of Kazakhstan's different peoples. Mass celebrations of different ethnic



holidays have become a happy tradition.

Continuing the efforts to maintain political stability in different ways including the harmonization of religious relations in the country is the main condition for Kazakhstan's successful development. As of today, there are more than 30 religious movements in Kazakhstan, the biggest being the traditional for Kazakhstan Islam, and Russian Orthodox. There is an incredible harmony in the relationship among these two religions and many others. The experts have noted a so-called "friendly religion" phenomenon in the country - Orthodox Christians wish joy to fellow Muslims on Kurban Ait while Muslims, in turn, felicitate Christians on Easter and Christmas. It is worth noting that even though Kazakhstan supports spiritual development, it remains a secular state and opposes any attempts to establish religious exclusivity.

In general terms, keeping and nurturing interethnic stability is the foundation of governmental policy in Kazakhstan. The idea of interethnic agreement and equality of all ethnic groups that call Kazakhstan their home is a legislative norm. Development and implementation of an effective system of measures for further harmonization of national and religious relations in the country, the fostering of tolerance and prevention of religious extremism in Kazakh society is a complex task shared by all governmental and non-governmental organizations.

The following fundamental paradigm governs the field of national relations of modern Kazakhstan - the growth of national consciousness of native Kazakhs can only happen when favorable conditions are created for the development of other ethnic groups at the same time. The government keeps emphasizing the fact that Kazakhstan can be progressive only when the efforts and desires of the entire population are consolidated and taken into account. "Interethnic harmony is a life-giving oxygen. We do not notice it when we breathe, we do it automatically, we just live. We must cherish our unity and ethnic harmony", said the President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev in his traditional Address to the people of the country.

"For what is stability and harmony? It is the family well-being, safety, shelter. Peace is the joy of fatherhood and motherhood, the health of our parents and the happiness of our children. Peace is a stable job, salary and confidence in the future. Peace and stability are a public property that needs to be strengthened and protected with our everyday efforts," he continued.

Kazakhstan's formidable success as a country that has been able to prevent ethnic and religious strife in a territory where 140 ethnic groups and many religions reside can be a model for study and imitation for some Western countries that are facing multicultural crises.

A Nation Towards Transformation

■ *Mohammad Shafiq Hamdam*

Afghanistan of 2001 is not measurable with the Afghanistan of 2015. As a citizen of this country, I have lived my entire life in Afghanistan; I can easily see these rapid development and progress. Still it is far away from western standards and many non-Afghans may not see the progress, which I can see. It is because; I have seen devastated Afghanistan that is why I appreciate everything around me. It is an old country, but with a new generation - a country which has experienced unprecedented fight and war in the region, a country with two decades of war and more than twelve years into the war against terrorism and insurgency. Threat and challenges still remain, but it's not greater than the determination of a nation. 352,000 strong Afghan National Security Forces, backed by the US and NATO forces, are assurance that Afghanistan will never go back to the dark era.

In the last thirteen years, together with its international partners and coalition forces, Afghanistan has created sufficient political, economic and social forces, which will safeguard this country against the return of Afghanistan to the miseries of the past. Afghans have taken courageous steps in reasserting their freedom, sovereignty and international recognition. The established institutions, laws and strategies for the present and the future of this country have enabled Afghan citizens to take charge of our own destiny. Assuming the full security responsibility of the country and three presidential elections are the practical examples. December 28 marked an important milestone in the history of Afghanistan, where Afghan National Security Forces assumed full security responsibility across the country from NATO and ISAF forces. While safeguarding tremendous achievements of last one decade, we will continue to broaden those achievements through the decade of transformation, from 2015 to 2024. This was agreed and supported by the world community in Tokyo Conference in July 2012. Of course, Afghanistan is not a perfect country and still it will require assistance and support of the United States and the International Community. But long term commitments of the United States, NATO and the international community are assurance for the future stability of this country. Transition of security to the ANSF and end of ISAF mission, which were a desire of the Afghan government, have created lots of uncertainty among Afghan people. But the announcement of the new NATO mission for post 2014 to train, advise and assist the Afghan National Security Forces, the Resolute Support Mission and Operation Freedom's Sentinel, a US led counterterrorism mission against the remnants of Al-Qaeda. The strategic partnership agreements with the key developed countries and bilateral security agreement with the United States have reassured Afghan people that those commitments were not only on the paper and lip services, but practical. Now majority of Afghans and the insurgents have learned that Afghanistan will not be abandoned by the US and the international community. So that period of uncertainty will be completely finished and it can further accelerate the process of development in Afghanistan.

Afghans are hopeful about their future. And there are many reasons for this great nation to be optimistic and hopeful against false predic-

tions and struggle of the enemies of Afghanistan to sabotage the security and political transition. But the security and political transition have been completed, the Bilateral Security Agreement with the United States is signed and the new NATO and US mission has started. These are the key and fundamental steps that make Afghans optimistic about their future and worry their enemies.

70% of the population is under the age of 25. Using very little opportunity Afghan youth has unprecedentedly achieved in the area of sports, education, media business and governance. The Afghan National Football beat India 2-0 and won its first ever south Asia football cup in 2013. This was not only a sport's cup, but for many Afghans it was a cup of the Afghan unity. For the first time ever in my life I have seen 24 hour non-stop party around Afghanistan, where millions of people came together and celebrated their historic victory. That was a day of hope, solidarity and peace in Afghanistan. This was 11 September 2013, exactly 12 years after the 9/11 Al-Qaeda attacks on the US - the attack, which was planned in Afghanistan by Al-Qaeda. But only 12 years later at the same day Afghanistan was no more safe havens of Al-Qaeda and terrorists, but instead the nation was celebrating the biggest ever celebration of its victory in the sport; neither in a war, nor terror.

What a difference? Only 13 years ago, there was only one radio station run by the Taliban. But today there are 75 TV stations and 180 radio stations throughout this country and 18 million Afghans have access to GSM mobile phone and near one million internet users. Over 10.5 million students enrolled in schools, colleges and universities. This is one third of the entire population of Afghanistan, around 37% or of them are girls. Over 4,500 school buildings have constructed over a decade. But a decade ago there were less than one million students, with almost no female participation. This is what I call massive fundamental change and investment. These gains cost a lot and it has not come for free. We appreciate the sacrifice of our patriot Afghan fellows and our international partners, who made these all possible for us. We still have a long way to go. In the decade of transformation, we are moving towards self-sustainability and a nation building process. So in order to further strengthen the gains of last one decade and widen these gains, we should focus on security sector reform, regional cooperation, economic development and peace talks. These are essential for a secure, prosperous and stable Afghanistan. Afghan nation has proven that the warlords and extremists cannot rule them ever. This has to be realized by the international community as well and they should not underestimate the power of young generation of Afghanistan and they should not overestimate the power of warlords. We have a young democracy, young National Security Forces and a young parliament, with more than one quarter of women and young parliamentarians. Afghanistan has a vibrant civil society organizations, free media and growing private sector, mostly led and managed by the young generation of the country, the young Afghan generation has proven that they can do it. This young system and young generation will need sincere assistance and cooperation of its international partners, particularly support of the US and NATO. It is easier to support good people than fighting unknown evils.

Mohammad Shafiq Hamdam is a political and social activist. You can follow him on Twitter @shafiqhamdam



Chairman / Editor in Chief: Dr. Hussain Yasa

Vice Chairman: Kazim Ali Gulzari

Phone: +93 799 005 019/799 408 27/1777 005 019

E-mail: mail@outlookafghanistan.com, outlookafghanistan@gmail.com

Address: V-137, Street 6, Phase 4, Shahrak Omeed Sabz, Kabul, Afghanistan