



Afghan Women Would Rather Talk About Recovery

By Rita Henley Jensen
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As Obama mulls a U.S. troop buildup in Afghanistan, three Afghan women who run social service efforts in their troubled homeland wanted to shift the topic. They prefer talking about schools, jobs, safety and health care.

(WOMENSENEWS)--As the world waits for President Barack Obama to announce next week his plan to send up to 30,000 additional U.S. troops to Afghanistan, three female leaders of civil society efforts focused their concerns on nation building.

The trio wanted to talk about something else: the country's recovery.

They also wanted to discuss individuals they came across in their work who showed why the country needs more international help providing education, jobs, health care and safety. Moreover, the fiefdoms of the Taliban, war lords, tribal leaders and drug traffickers leave the nation poorly equipped to reduce the corruption and violence.

The women interviewed were Sakena Yacoobi, founder of girls' schools throughout the country and neighboring Pakistan; Fatima Gailani, head of a major national nongovernmental organization; and Mary Akrami, the founder of shelters for women and survivors of domestic violence.

All three women said the situation in Afghanistan remains precarious, especially for women. U.S. troops weren't an issue they said they felt qualified to assess, but they did understand the country's struggle to provide its people with a functional society.

Press reports indicate President Obama will announce next week that he has determined not to leave Afghanistan, nor to continue the status quo, but to increase troop levels between 25,000 to 30,000 troops. The United States currently has 68,000 troops in Afghanistan--at a cost of \$1 million per military member, or \$68 billion per year. The additional troops would mean that U.S. spending would approach \$100 billion a year.

In contrast, Reuters reported this week, quoting Oxfam International, that since U.S.-backed forces toppled the Taliban in 2001, international donors have poured more than \$20 billion in development and humanitarian aid into the war-ravaged nation.

But the Reuters report, which backs up criticism from aid agencies and observers, said Afghans felt the funds were insufficient and wasted, and there needed to be more accountability to ensure aid got to where it was needed.

Yacoobi Runs Schools

Sakena Yacoobi founded the Afghan Institute of Learning in 1995, after completing her education as an international student in California and relocating her parents and other relatives--a total of 17--from



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Afghanistan to the United States.

Yacoobi's institute operated 80 underground schools for girls during the Taliban era, when educating girls was banned; it now manages the education of 350,000 women and girls in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In addition, she has established four medical clinics.

After her family members were settled, she went back to Afghanistan. "My family said, 'No. You will be killed.' But I went back." Yacoobi said.

Now she worries about the millions of refugees also returning from Pakistan and Iran, living in shipping containers without sanitary facilities, water or electricity, in most cases. This compounds the effect of decades of armed conflict, she says, and control by the Soviets and the Taliban, as well as war lords and members of organized crime.

"Billions have been spent. Where did it go?" Yacoobi asked.

"We need infrastructure," she added. "The snow from the mountains melts and runs into other countries. We have no dams, only wells, and the pipes break."

Women also need roads to access health care, electricity for economic development and most of all education that leads to jobs, she said.

When Yacoobi talks about the country's needs she said she thinks about a woman she simply called Malaka. Like the other two Afghan women, she only used a first name in her story.

"She was 24 when I met her, married with three kids. She wanted to go to school, but her mother-in-law said no, she had too much work to do," Yacoobi said.

When Yacoobi met Malaka as a young woman wishing to attend one of her schools, the younger woman lived in a three-room mud hut in Southern Afghanistan, along with her husband, her children and her in-laws.

Married at age 14, she pleaded with her husband for the opportunity to learn, despite her many duties on the small farm. In addition to caring for her children and in-laws, she tended the sheep, chickens and the crops. Eventually, her husband countermanded his mother's objections and made a bargain with Malaka: She could go to the center to learn if she finished all of her chores before she left for the center. Malaka began rising at 4 a.m., completing her work in time to reach school by 8 a.m.

Within a year, she was reading at a third grade level. She began a sewing class and learned she was a good tailor. Soon, she was reading at a sixth grade level and graduated along with 300 other women. Her husband was there, clapping along with everyone else. She became a manager of the center and then another center. She took on the duties of teaching the health class too, educating her village about birth control and reproductive health, Yacoobi says.

With that kind of education and leadership replicated by women around the country, which has produced a dramatic increase in the number of midwives, is how Afghanistan has significantly reduced its infant mortality rate since 2002. But Yacoobi notes that Afghanistan's maternal mortality is still the second highest in the world, after Sierra Leone.

"This is what the United States must do if peace is to come to Afghanistan. The U.S. should stay. We need assistance in skills training and capacity building," Yacoobi said.

Gailani Offers Humanitarian Aid

Fatima Gailani is president of the Afghan Red Crescent Society (a member of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) and considers herself a champion of democracy, for



women's rights and all the marginalized.

Afghanistan, strategically positioned as a trade route, is a young nation, Gailani said, because the average life expectancy is 42 years old in a nation that has been at war for 24 years.

Gailani talked about a young man she called Nowroz, who appeared at the Red Crescent headquarters seeking help and insisted on seeing her, as she was the organization's president.



Credit: U.S. Navy Mass Communications Specialist Petty Officer 1st Class Monica R. Nelson on Flickr, Creative Commons

"He was a young man just out of prison for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. He had no money to return to his home village . . . He was thin, nervous with dark skin," Gailani said.

He was cold and begged her to help him get some clothing.

"I asked, what were you doing in that place where he was arrested. He said, 'Where am I supposed to be? At my job?' He is Pashtun and most of the schools and health facilities are closed in Pashtun provinces. The unemployment rate in Afghanistan is 40 percent."

The young man went on to tell her that he wants to get married. He said: "I want to live to see my children grow. I want a home. I want all this, but you tell me how? I am prepared to go back to school, but where?"

"How was I to answer him?" asked Gailani.

Young Afghan men are paid \$200 to join the fighting, she said, but would gladly avoid it if they could find a factory job for \$100 a month.

For her, the wrongly imprisoned Nowroz shows what needs to change in Afghanistan.

"They never experienced ordinary life," she said of the country's young men. "We must give them a taste."

Akrami Runs Shelters

Mary Akrami manages two shelters in Kabul for survivors of domestic violence, including a 6-year-old who ran away to avoid being sold into a marriage. She also manages a network of training centers in four provinces for women that teach literacy, English and computer skills

When she thinks of the women and girls she helps, she recalls Naghida.

Her family had tortured her and cut her hair, she said, and her father killed the young man Naghida wished to marry, in defiance of her father's wishes.

For now, Naghida lives indefinitely in one of the shelters, recovering from torture and grieving the murder of her fiancé.

Not only is her life in danger if she leaves, her decision to select her own husband has set off a war between two Afghan tribes. After her father killed her intended husband, the tribe of her fiancé revenged the murder, setting off a series of slayings that has yet to end.

"If the international community goes back, what will happen to the women of Afghanistan?" Akrami asked. "Inside the country, we have powerful war lords, the Taliban. We don't want another civil war."

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