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Taliban's 'clash of civilizations' distant from people of Pamir

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"We do not live, we simply survive. Even the Creator has forgotten us." Thus did a Kirghiz tribesman in the Pamir mountains of Afghanistan describe the struggle to live.

Is there more to Afghanistan than blood and death? Is there a contribution Canadian civilians can make to this country?

I visited four regions of Badakhshan, in northwestern Afghanistan, crossing more than 1,000 kilometres at altitudes up to 3,000 to 4,000 metres above sea level.

Twice, I crossed the border from Tajikistan into Afghanistan at official checkpoints. The other two times, I needed "special" permission to make somewhat challenging crossings.

I rode in vehicles, on horseback, or simply walked to visit 10 villages. Often, the roads had been made without the use of heavy equipment. There was no asphalt. I walked along cliff edges, in knee-deep mud and crossed bodies of water on tire tubes. FOCUS Humanitarian Assistance was central to facilitating my safe crossing from Tajikistan into Afghanistan.

Committed Canadians are here. Three individuals from Calgary live in Afghanistan and contribute to the well-being of these mountainous people. Two are former Afghan refugees who settled in Canada and have returned to co-ordinate assistance for a nutrition program and housing construction in the villages.

A third, who was involved in the settlement of Afghan refugees in Calgary, now leads a drug detoxification program.

The Canadian outlook they bring -- the values of a pluralistic civil society and tolerance for cultural, political and religious diversity -- is necessary for Afghanistan to succeed as a democracy.

The majority of people living in the Pamir mountains are farmers, with some nomadic herdsman. All are gentle people. Their concerns are about sufficient food to survive the winter, access to rudimentary medicine and schools for their children.

The so called "clash of civilizations" between Islam and the West is furthest from their minds. For them, there is not one monolithic Islam as there is not a monolithic West.

They are grateful for the stability NATO forces bring to their country. Even the children show the stress of war, withdrawing in fear as strangers approach.

The Taliban never gained a foothold here, but their impact on the villages was immediate and direct as they drove this vast area into famine. During the Taliban's rule, people said they ate grass and "survived on the harvest of fruits."

When I recounted the concern for personal security and the mounting loss of lives of Canadian soldiers, a village leader answered: "You are thousands of kilometres away and still feel the repercussions of al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Imagine how we survived under them and we still fear their return."

According to the villagers, the Taliban have a tenuous connection to Islam, quoting verses from the Qur'an that suit their purposes while ignoring verses that contradict their extreme interpretation.

While the Taliban adhere to Sunni Islam, they were unable to find supporters among diverse ethnic groups who adhere to the Sunni, Twelver Shiite and Ismaili interpretations.

The Mujhadin are a different story. With some exceptions, the Mujhadin instituted a reign of terror upon the people of the Pamir.

First, they occupied parts of Badakhshan. They damaged the region's ecology, destroyed religious shrines and slaughtered livestock.

Cows, sheep and goats here do not derive their value as a steak on a plate. They are far more valuable alive as they provide milk, butter, cheese, fertilizer for crops, and garments made from wool and goat hair. The Mujhadin killed thousands of animals, plunging villages into poverty.

In some districts of Badakhshan, they forced young men at gunpoint to cross the river to the Tajik side to sell drugs.

These young men risked death on both sides. They would either face death on the Afghan side and their families would be harmed if they did not cross the river Panj with the drugs, or they could be shot by Tajik and Russian soldiers guarding the border.

In the Wakhan corridor, the Mujhadin sell opium to villagers. Drug addiction is not a result of recreational use as it is in Europe and North America, but because there is no access to medicine.

Opium provides relief from injury and illness. People also use it to escape from the reality of their poverty and unemployment.

In the villages I visited, the addiction rate ranged from less than one per cent to 20 per cent. In some regions, 50 per cent of the households have lost their assets such as land, animals and homes to drug dealers. Some have even lost their children.

The poppy is no longer grown in most villages in the four regions I visited. Yet, after villagers work tirelessly to reduce their dependence on opium, the Mujhadin suppliers subvert their efforts by providing opium for free.

This is not just business for the Mujhadin, they actually want these villages to fail as a social system because the people of Badakhshan are an ethnically diverse and religious minority.

In addition to the threat of war, poverty and opium addiction, climate change is rearing its head.

The past six years have witnessed dramatic changes. Villages in high alpine areas, which have never had a successful wheat crop, are now able to grow wheat.

With this change come the threat of high river levels, washed-out bridges and unusual weather patterns. The impact of climate change varies depending on the ecological region, but the common refrain is that "we can no longer predict."

Badakhshan villagers pride themselves on having developed calendars based on the movement of the sun and appearance of certain stars. This is no longer useful.

In some regions, seeding begins 15 to 20 days in advance in April instead of March and harvest also occurs 15 to 20 days earlier in August instead of September.

One of the tragic manifestations of increased heat is the rise in the number of people dying from diarrhea and fever.

One image remains fixed in my mind. After a gruelling seven-hour walk, I arrived in the village of Chasnud. As I approached the houses made of clay and stones, I noticed a father leaning over his child, fanning him with a branch.

Recalling the many hours I spent watching over my own children as they slept, I pulled out my camera to capture this scene under a tree. When I got a little closer, I noticed a panicked expression on the father's face.

Then, my eyes veered towards the child, a blond boy who was so emaciated that only skin and bones remained. The father explained they had taken the child to a clinic in the nearest village, 14 hours round-trip under the hot sun.

The child's condition had worsened because of the trip. They had run out of oral re-hydration medicine and the parents had tried everything. I quickly gave medicine to reduce the fever. The fever came down, but the diarrhea continued.

I gave them the formula for the oral rehydration mixture of salt and sugar. Clean water is not a problem in this region supplied by natural springs, but salt and sugar are rare commodities.

On Friday, I left the village of Chasnud and on the following Monday, medicine was sent across the river by boat. I do not know if the child lives.

As we debate the merits of Canada's military in Afghanistan, let us also ask what Canadian civilians can do to support the diverse and gentle people of Afghanistan to simply live.

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