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QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

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Articles have been accepted in good faith, if you have any queries please contact the editor

## FROM THE CONVENER

*The last SAWAN generated email responses from members expressing sorrow about the depressing state of Afghanistan. I had hoped to fill this SAWAN with only uplifting news by drawing on reports on the overwhelming response to the latest Australian tour of a RAWA representative. Our members have done their utmost to raise funds and inform the public about the plight of Afghan women, and the tour has been a great success.*

*Unfortunately the joy does not last long. The government of Afghanistan has decided to produce heartbreaking news for RAWA and Afghanistan's refugees. So the work continues, and SAWA will expand its support projects and rely on the generosity of Australians to come to the help of Afghan women.*

Matthias Tomczak

## RAWA member Sohaila in Australia

As announced in the last SAWAN, RAWA sent one of its members on a visit of Australia to report on the situation in Afghanistan. Zoya, the originally proposed speaker, had to attend exams and could not come. Her place was taken by Sohaila, who had represented RAWA abroad already on other occasions. Sohaila addressed meetings in Townsville, Brisbane, Armidale, Sydney, Melbourne, Castlemaine, Adelaide, Broken Hill and Cygnet (Tasmania).

### Soheila in Castlemaine

Sohaila spoke about her work with orphans near Rawalpindi. Many of the orphans in fact have parents who are unable to provide for their young children, some of whom then had to beg in the streets. RAWA was able to take these children and ensure that they are fed, clothed, cared for, loved and educated.

The situation within Afghanistan is worsening to the extent that girls are molested, raped or even killed on their way to school.

Many are now confined to their homes for security and are missing out on education completely.

The Castlemaine audience was shocked at the conditions described and gave generously to help RAWA in its work. Sohaila goes home with the best wishes of the supporters in Castlemaine. Over \$1800 was raised, and members are now preparing a submission to go to all Australian political parties asking what their policies are towards Afghanistan and what they plan to do to help Afghan women and children.

Grace McCaughey

### Soheila in Adelaide

During her time in Adelaide Sohaila she visited three schools; Loreto College, St Aloysius and Annesley. After outlining the situation for women and children of Afghanistan today, Sohaila impressed upon the girls that they should not take their good fortune for granted. She explained that there is much that can and must be done to stamp out injustice in Afghanistan. It was pleasing to see how many students wanted to know how they could help.



Sohaila speaks at Annesley College assembly

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## SAWA OBJECTIVES

- Raise funds for Afghan women and children;
- increase community awareness of the forgotten needs of Afghan women;
- encourage women, men and young people to join SAWA-Australia ;
- set up SAWA/RAWA support groups throughout Australia.

**Convener:** Matthias Tomczak

**Secretary:** Barbara James

**Treasurer:** Heidi Leffanue

**Committee:** Ruth Redfern, Dawn Atkinson, Grace McCaughey

**Newsletter Editor:** Matthias Tomczak

**Public Officer:** Ruth Redfern

**Auditor:** Bob Shahinger

On Wednesday 8 August Sohaila spoke at a public event organised jointly by the Australian Education Union, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and SAWA-Australia. As more and more people filed through the doors of the AEU building we knew it was to be a success. 150 people had come to hear Sohaila's first hand account of the brave struggle for human rights, democracy and secular values in her home country, Afghanistan.



*SAWA secretary Barbara James opens the meeting in Adelaide*

Sohaila told of the realities of life in Afghanistan today; of the misuse of power by government officials and their failure to respond to the needs of the people. She urged Australia to support RAWA's struggle by helping finance their many humanitarian projects, but also to put pressure on the Australian government to insist that the Afghan government do all it can to promote true democracy.

Sohaila then answered questions from the floor, including those from two brave schoolgirls, incredulous of the abuse of women and girls in Afghanistan.

Imprints Booksellers sold books related to the topic of Afghanistan on the night and donated 15% of the proceeds to SAWA. Many thanks must go to Imprints and in particular to Ms Gayle Miller for her support. Dan Murphy, Communications Coordinator, AEU, is to be acknowledged and thanked for his invaluable assistance during Sohaila's visit, particularly for his help with the media. Also to be thanked is our loyal sponsor, WILPF, who co-hosted Sohaila's visit; a generous gesture which helped our planning a great deal.

We are proud to announce that SAWA raised \$1,713 from donations during the evening.

The following evening SAWA held their second annual fundraising dinner in Adelaide. Due to the resounding success of the first dinner in 2006 it was decided to hold the second at the same restaurant, the Pondok Bali. Specialising in authentic Balinese cuisine, the restaurant has a warmth and colourful ambience that is inviting and relaxing. The dinner proved so popular that we booked out the entire restaurant!

During the evening Sohaila spoke to guests, telling them about the many challenges faced by the people of Afghanistan today. She spoke of the inspirational women of RAWA who struggle for freedom in a country ravaged by war, corruption and religious fundamentalism.

A wide range of handicrafts made by Afghan widows in refugee camps was available for purchase on the night. There was even

the opportunity to win a free term of belly dance lessons, courtesy of the Belly Dance Academy of Nayima Hassan, for the lady with the best 'shoulder shimmy'!

The food was great, the company excellent, but above all we were able to meet Sohaila, our brave RAWA visitor, in a relaxed, friendly environment.

SAWA raised over \$3,000 from the dinner, donations and the sale of handicrafts.

Barbara James, Secretary, SAWA-Australia.

### **Pakistan forces closure of Naseema Shaheed School**

Six months ago the government of Pakistan announced the closure of all Afghan refugee camps. People in the camps were given the choice of receiving an ID card and relocating to one of Pakistan's cities or make their way back to Afghanistan. Most camp people cannot afford the rents charged in the cities and have no choice but to return to their war-torn country.

RAWA was notified at the beginning of August that its Khewa refugee camp will be demolished by the end of the month. This will mean the end of Naseema Shaheed High School and Malalai Clinic. RAWA is currently considering its options for replacements of these outstandingly successful institutions. While it may be possible to establish a clinic in Afghanistan, the running of schools in Afghanistan is the prerogative of the government, and RAWA can operate schools only in Pakistan. SAWA is in contact with RAWA about the future of its support project. One option currently under consideration is to allocate the support of a RAWA school in Rawalpindi (Pakistan) to SAWA. We shall report on the final decision in the next newsletter and post any news on our website.

### **New SAWA project to support Kabul's widows**

The article by "Kabul, a city of widows" by Independent UK journalist Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, which was reprinted in the last SAWAN, made several SAWA members think what can be done to help. The committee approached RAWA and received a project proposal for the training of ten widows in handicraft and carpet making. The project is planned for Kabul and will be the first SAWA-supported project in Afghanistan.

The correspondence in preparation of the project contained some graphic description of life in Kabul. Amena (some of us will remember her from her visit to Australia in October 2005) wrote:

"Talking specifically about the salary, you will find a big margin of what a skilled person gets in Pakistan as compared to Afghanistan. There is a very low percentage of skilled workers in Afghanistan but a huge demand for them on the other hand. For instance a person with a bachelor degree can easily be employed for \$1000 - \$3000/month, while the same person will have to struggle hard to get a job of \$75 - \$150/month in Pakistan. There is one exception in this regard: The Afghan government still continues with the low salary for its low rank employees, which results in enormous problems for them. For instance, a teacher gets nearly \$60/month, which is of course nothing for him/her and she/he has to do other jobs beside that. I have been the witness of many schools in Afghanistan where most of the teachers sign the attendance sheet and go back to

oother work, or in some cases they mark their attendance for one month. Almost all the well-skilled and well-experienced people have been attracted by the NGOs (the most dirtiest business in Afghanistan)."

This confirms earlier reports that the Afghan government has lost all its skilled staff to the more than 2,400 NGOs that operate in the country and is now bereft of all expertise. By supporting RAWA projects you can be assured that your donations benefit Afghan women directly and are not spent on exorbitant salaries of foreign NGO staff.

### **SAWA protests Malalai Joya's expulsion from parliament**

Three months ago Afghan MP Malalai Joya was expelled from parliament after saying in a television interview that parliamentary proceedings had descended to a level "worse than a zoo". Parliament voted to suspend her from the house for the rest of her five-year term. She was also banned from travelling outside the country and threatened with defamation proceedings.

On 15 June SAWA sent an email to foreign minister Alexander Downer in support of Malalai Joya. The ensuing correspondence is documented here for the record:

*Honourable Minister,*

*you will no doubt be aware that elected Afghan parliamentarian Malalai Joya has been banned from Afghanistan's parliament for three years, banned from travelling overseas and threatened with a trial at the country's High Court for "humiliating the institution of parliament."*

*The reason for these measures are an interview by Malalai Joya with Tolo TV, an independent station, during which she described the parliament with the words: "A stable or a zoo is better, at least there you have a donkey that carries a load and a cow that provides milk. This parliament is worse than a stable or a zoo." Her words referred to the known fact that many Afghan parliamentarians are warlords, drug barons and criminals.*

*Malalai Joya's expulsion from parliament has received wide press coverage, among others by The Independent (UK) on 22 May and the Canberra Times on 2 June, which also reported that there have been demonstrations in support of Malalai Joya in several Afghan cities. Despite this wide coverage and internal protest Malalai Joya's rights as MP have not been reinstated, nor has the threat of a court case been withdrawn.*

*On behalf of the Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan (SAWA-Australia) I ask you to make representations to the government of Afghanistan on Malalai Joya's behalf and demand that all parliamentary rights of Malalai Joya be reinstated and the threat of a court case be lifted.*

*While Malalai Joya's language during the interview may not be appropriate for a parliamentarian it is comparable to some of the language that is occasionally used in Australia's parliament. Such occasions usually result in the exclusion of the guilty party from parliament for a day or two, which seems appropriate. Malalai Joya's exclusion for three years is, however, clearly excessive, and banning her from overseas travel is totally unjustified.*

*Malalai Joya has been one of the staunchest defenders of democratic rights, particularly the human rights of women. She has repeatedly denounced the crimes of warlords and drug barons and demanded that they be brought to justice. In this she has the overwhelming support of her constituents.*

*May I mention in this context that Australia has troops stationed in Afghanistan. Their declared purpose is to assist in the rebuilding of the country and to safeguard its fledgling democracy. It is SAWA's view that this gives Australia a moral obligation to protest against flagrant violations of democratic rule. I urge you to take action in Malalai Joya's case and demand from the Afghan government the reinstatement of her rights as a parliamentarian.*

SAWA members sent similar emails to other parliamentarians. Tanya Plibersek, Shadow Minister for Human Services, Housing, Youth and Women, acknowledged the email, saying:

*Thank you for emailing me about Malalai Joya - the inspiring Afghani politician who has recently been banned from Parliament.*

*I too was concerned to read that Ms Joya's parliamentary rights were removed. Ms Joya is a fearless proponent of women's rights and has made a significant contribution to the debate about women's rights in Afghanistan.*

*I have written to the Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, asking him to provide me with advice about the diplomatic action his government is taking in regards to Ms Joya's treatment.*

The reply from Minister Downer's office to SAWA's letter is dated 12 July. It says:

*Thank you for your email dated 15 June 2007 concerning the expulsion for three years of Afghan female MP Ms Malalai Joya from Parliament. I have been asked to reply on behalf of Mr Downer.*

*I would start by noting that progress in reconstructing a secure, stable, viable democratic state in Afghanistan since 2001 has been substantial: a new constitution has been adopted; a president and a parliament elected; and critical state institutions, including an independent human rights commission, have been established.*

*Parliamentarians like Ms Joya will play an important role in the country's democratic future. You should be assured that in our ongoing dialogue with Afghanistan, both in Canberra and through our embassy in Kabul, the Government will continue to follow Ms Joya's case closely and to advocate inclusive democratic and parliamentary processes in Afghanistan. The Australian Government will also continue to give practical support to strengthening democracy in Afghanistan, including through Mr Downer's recent announcement of an additional \$1 million to be provided to the Asia Foundation to build the capacity of the Afghan Independent Electoral Commission.*

### **A new documentary: View from a Grain of Sand**

In 2000 the US-American document maker Meena Nanji meets three women in an Afghan refugee camp in Pakistan. Shapiray had been given into an arranged marriage. Her husband, a government employee, had been threatened by the Taliban, and the family had to flee to Pakistan. Now a mother of five children,



Shapiray works as a teacher in the camp, the first year without pay, now on a small salary.

Roena is unmarried. She describes her father as a "modern thinker", who allowed his daughters to go to medical college and did not force them into marriage. She now works for the International Medical Corps Clinic in the camp and wants to become a "well-known doctor". She lives with her mother and extended family in Peshawar, a 40 minute drive from the camp.

Wajia, a widow with three children, comes from a village in Farah province, where she grew up uneducated and illiterate. Her husband, a freedom fighter against the Russian occupation, was killed in an ambush. Wajia received her education through RAWA and is now a RAWA member.

The three women share memories of better times with Meena Nanji. They recall the days when the king opened schools and universities for women, when women could move freely during the day and at night, when they could study side by side with men, encouraged to take up work. Nanji even includes a short clip from the 1960s: a government movie produced to hire women as bus drivers.

These scenes from the 1960s and early 1970s make it so much harder to comprehend what follows: how a country on the way to prosperity with good prospects for its women and men can be bombed beyond recognition, how women can be robbed of all their rights. Using archival footage, including video obtained by RAWA with hidden cameras, Nanji documents the various stages – from Soviet occupation to Civil War between the warlords, Taliban terror, US invasion and return of the warlords as the "Northern Alliance" and as members of parliament in the new democracy – with insight and excellent analysis.

Nanji returns to the camp in 2001 and again in 2003. She finds Roena still working for the International Medical Corps Clinic, looking after poor families in a camp that is falling into ruins. She follows Shapiray and her family, who have returned to Afghanistan and live in their ruined old house without electricity or running water. Shapiray teaches at the local school. She and her husband, who has again found a government job, support each other well; the only argument before the camera revolves around Shapiray's devotion to religious practice, which her husband does not share.

Wajia, who also still lives in the camp, is just preparing for a trip to Kabul, where she is to attend to some RAWA business. Nanji accompanies her, and we witness a RAWA group discussion with a woman who just survived a suicide attempt. It was a case of taking drugs – we are spared lengthy exposure to horrific images of women who set themselves alight, a desperate act that is becoming more widespread every month – and the group tries to find a way to help.

By embedding the grim reality of today's Afghanistan in a narrative that encapsulates 50 years of Afghan history Nanji delivers more than documentation. She offers insight into developments, into their reasons, and into the interests that shape them.

But the greatest strength of Nanji's film are the people. Shapiray's smiling eyes when she has a quiet moment with one of her children; the child's happiness when she can proudly count to ten; the laughter and animated conversation in Roena's house during a family meal – it is in these moments

that one gets a glimpse of the source for the strength of these women; one understands that it is all worth while, that the enormous struggle of Afghanistan's women to win back what was lost has to continue.

Meena Nanji set out to deliver a documentary about the bleak lives of women from a devastated country. She produced an homage to the women of Afghanistan.

*View from a Grain of Sand* is available on loan for private viewing for SAWA members. For bookings go to the Members' Area of the SAWA website. To find out more about the film go to <http://www.viewgrainofsand.com>. To obtain your own copy go to <http://www.customflix.com/217728>.

### SAWA acknowledges new sponsors

In recent months SAWA has received generous support from two new sponsors. Rex Regional Airlines sponsored Sohaila's return flight from Adelaide to Broken Hill. Katherine Close from LCdesign produced valuable large-scale posters to promote SAWA's support for RAWA. We thankfully acknowledge the support from both sponsors, as we value the ongoing support from our other sponsors.

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