



THE SAWAN

SAWA-Australia

SUPPORT ASSOCIATION FOR THE WOMEN OF AFGHANISTAN

NOVEMBER 2007

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

ISSUE 16

Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan Published by SAWA-Australia Inc. A38759 ABN: 73 162 014 759

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

Order your SAWA Christmas cards now! Send a friend a gift by making a donation! Order from the SAWA website www.sawa-australia.org

FROM THE CONVENER

On 24 September ABC's *Four Corners* showed the documentary "Lifting the Veil - Afghanistan unveiled" by the Britain-based Pakistani film maker Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy. The film documents the plight of war widows begging in the streets of Kabul and the horror of self-immolation of women who set themselves alight in ever growing numbers to escape from forced marriage, violence or inability to feed their children. The impact of Obaid-Chinoy's film is immediate; her visit to a hospital where heavily burnt women are treated but not expected to survive leaves an imprint in the viewer's mind for days or weeks. Many viewers went to the *Four Corners* Open Letters website to express their outrage and heartache over the film and asked for ways to change the situation. In response the site moderator gave SAWA's web address, and for a few days SAWA's web traffic went up by 400%.

The web traffic is now back to normal, but we thank the ABC for supporting Afghanistan's women by bringing many Australians into contact with SAWA. The response from the public has been very encouraging; three weeks after the programme cheques were still arriving at the SAWA post office box. It shows that there is a large untapped potential for help and that we have to work hard to make more Australians aware of our work.

Closure of Khewa camp causes misery and distress

As already foreshadowed in the last SAWAN, Khewa refugee camp was closed on the orders of the Pakistani government. For the refugees this was a nightmare situation; most could imagine the difficult situations that would confront them when returning to

Afghanistan. Many came from provinces near the border with Pakistan, regions where the security situation is among the worst of all Afghan provinces, and many of them have no schools or medical facilities at all.

Khewa camp was one of the refugee camps in Pakistan where RAWA had a substantial presence for over 20 years. During that time it developed into a well-known education and culture centre for Afghan intellectuals. Poets, writers, politicians, artists, doctors, and others settled in this camp to work closely with RAWA. Over 1000 youths were getting an excellent education in RAWA's schools. Sports tournaments at the national level, festivals, functions, theatres and music concerts were held in this camp, when thousands of visitors used to come from remote refugee camps. An Italian RAWA supporter who visited Khewa camp called it "one of the most important social experiments in the world, a factory of democracy and free thought."



Camp residents rescue roof trusses, window frames and whatever they can from their houses before leaving the camp

SAWA-Australia P.O. Box 90, Flinders University PO, Bedford Park SA 5042 www.sawa-australia.org info@sawa-australia.org

Bendigo Bank Account Number: 126035633 Adelaide Branch BSB: 633-000

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

Where in Afghanistan are the refugees to live without land and money to build a house and no help from the Afghan Government? How are they to find a job there when the unemployment rate is over 60%? How can they feed their children with the exorbitant rates where the price of 1 litre of liquid cooking gas is \$1.5 and the prices of other commodities are sky-high? Who will guarantee the safety of their children so they can be sent to school to study? Afghanistan's Education Ministry reported on 8 September that Taliban unrest has shut nearly 400 schools and that around 200,000 school children will not be able to attend classes in four provinces.

Nine months ago Iran expelled Afghan refugees who had hoped to find refuge there. Many now live in a newly established camp 60 km away from Kabul city in hell-like conditions. They still have no access to clean water and live only on bread. As winter approaches, their tents do not provide enough shelter from the cold, yet there is no help in sight.

RAWA has developed a plan to help the 300 families of Khewa camp resettle in Afghanistan and drawn up a budget:

Expenses	Number of families	Cost per unit	Total cost
Tent for shelter	300	\$195	\$58,500
Water well with pump	1 per 15 families	\$2,150	\$43,000
Basic needs	300	\$180	\$54,000
Firewood for winter	300	\$130	\$39,000
Grand total			\$194,500

The SAWA committee resolved to donate 75% of funds held in its accounts as SAWA's contribution to these needs. This amounted to \$6,650, which was transferred to RAWA on 5 November. Much more is obviously required, and donations are still urgently needed.

Widow Support project offers a promising start

In the last SAWAN we already mentioned plans to develop a project in support of Afghanistan's war widows. A first project is now about to start in Kabul. This project is designed to help a small number of widows to learn some basic skills in making handicrafts and then provide them with tools and materials to sell their product on the market.

The art of producing high quality handicraft was once the basis of an important export industry. The Taliban frowned upon artistic expression, and handicraft making fell into disrepute. Now a thriving market has developed in Kabul, and RAWA is developing export outlets through friends and supporters.

At the time of this report RAWA is in the process of setting up a small training centre with all necessary tools and materials. A well experienced trainer will be employed to teach ten widows over a three-month period all kinds of embroidery, tailoring, carpet-weaving and other handicraft skills.

After finishing the 3-month training course, the widows will be given a tool kit with the basic equipments and tools for making handicraft, including sewing machines for each of them. With this tool kit, the widows will be able to make handicraft on their own, in this way they can start running a business.

RAWA plans to combine the training centre with a classroom for adult literary courses, so that the widows can obtain reading and writing skills while being instructed in handicraft techniques. The centre will then also be open for general adult literary classes.

Training ten widows for three months requires a once-off investment of \$8,050, an amount SAWA already transferred to Kabul. This still leaves thousands of widows without support. SAWA intends to develop its Widow Support project into a permanent activity with the help of other humanitarian organizations. First discussions with Zonta reported below are promising and a great hope for the widows of Afghanistan.

November is fundraising month!

SAWA groups around the country have been busy organizing fundraising events this month. On 10 November Dawn and Jill opened their new home in Castlemaine for a fundraising lunch. The Sydney group held a fundraising lunch in the Balmain Bowling Club on 15 November. In Adelaide the Year 7 girls at Loreto College in Marryatville studying the topics of Justice and Refugees had the opportunity to learn about some of the injustices that women in Afghanistan have to face on a daily basis. SAWA secretary Barbara James was invited to come to explain why such an appalling situation exists in our modern world, and in doing so, challenge the girls to think deeply and act appropriately. The girls saw an excerpt from the excellent documentary "View from a Grain of Sand" by Meena Nanji, which features three Afghan women and reports the status of women in Afghanistan from 1930 to today. Though incredulous of the injustices, they were eager to have their questions answered and to help. Loreto College is to be commended and thanked for this opportunity and also for their kind offer to allow us to use their Junior School Hall for the full screening of the documentary on 13th November.

The film event at Loreto College was the second time Meena Nanji's documentary was shown in Adelaide. A private showing in October raised \$470, and a further showing is announced for December at Flinders University.

Sunday 4th November saw a new venture for SAWA's Adelaide group, a string quartet concert at an inner city church. Approximately fifty people attended the first SAWA Fundraising Concert where the Leabrook String Quartet entertained the audience with a beautiful selection of works by Mozart, Hayden, Dvorak and Schubert. The quartet, comprising Susan Currie, John Lawton, Mark Smith and Christine Tomczak, plays together often, and this showed in the strength and finesse of the music they produced. Our thanks must go to the players for giving us their valuable time and some wonderful music, and to Ruth Redfern for her organization. \$750 was raised. We hope that the Leabrook String Quartet will play for us again next year.

SAWA provides 2000 birthing kits for rural Afghanistan

In the villages of Afghanistan going through childbirth can be a life-threatening experience. In a society that does not allow a woman to leave house without the presence of her husband, many men do not allow routine medical examinations by male doctors to monitor pregnancies. There are few women doctors,

and low standards of hygiene pose a serious threat. According to UNICEF 1,600 pregnant women die for every 100,000 live births. Afghan Public Health Ministry statistics show that in rural areas this number is as high as 6,000 deaths for 100,000 births. In 1999 the Zonta club of the Adelaide Hills began a project to supply birthing kits to the poor countries of the world. The kits consist of a 1m x 1m plastic sheet for the mother to lie on, a piece of soap, two rubber gloves, three gauze squares, three cord ties, two plastic clamps and a sterile scalpel blade, all contained in a small press-sealed plastic bag. The total cost is one dollar, enough to save one woman's life through clean conditions during childbirth.

RAWA member Sohaila visited the Zonta club of Adelaide Hills during her Australian speaking tour in July/August 2007. This led to a first delivery of 2,000 birthing kits to RAWA. Use of the kits in remote Afghan villages proved so successful that RAWA asked for more.

This month SAWA will purchase a further 2,000 kits. Zonta will supply the kits' components, and SAWA volunteers in Adelaide and Sydney assisted by students from interested schools will assemble the kits and pack them for shipping. AusAid will cover the transportation costs.

So successful is the birthing kit project that components are currently in short supply. SAWA may have to wait until early 2008 before its order can be filled. The next newsletter will report on progress of SAWA's birthing kit shipment.

SAWA receives support from Zonta

The birthing kit project of the Zonta club of the Adelaide Hills is not the only support SAWA receives from Zonta, an organization that defines itself as "a global service organization of executives in business and professions working together to advance the status of women."

Following Sohaila's visit to Adelaide in August the Zonta club of Adelaide Torrens organized a collection among various Zonta clubs in South Australia and raised \$2,240 for RAWA. The club is currently looking into the possibility of contributing to another widow support project in 2008. SAWA greatly appreciates Zonta's support and acknowledges the role Zonta plays in promoting the cause of Afghanistan's women.

SAWA and friends of RAWA Japan take responsibility for Hewad High School in Rawalpindi

The closure of Khewa camp also meant the closure of Naseema Shaheed High School, SAWA's main support project for the last two years. But it does not end SAWA's support for the education of Afghan refugee children. While many refugees are returning to Afghanistan, there are still large numbers of Afghans living in Pakistan's cities.

SAWA now supports Hewad ("Fatherland") High School in Rawalpindi. This school is somewhat smaller than Naseema Shaheed High School. Although it is located in one of Pakistan's major cities, its facilities are inferior to the standard that Naseema Shaheed High School, despite it being located in a refugee camp, had reached through our support.

Hewad High School has received some support from Friends of RAWA Japan in the past, but Friends of RAWA Japan found it difficult to raise sufficient funds to cover the entire school budget. SAWA now supports the salaries of all teachers and support staff, while Friends of RAWA Japan look after all other costs. We hope that through this arrangement the school can acquire some computers and start to teach computer skills, nowadays an essential element of all education.



A class in Hewad High School in 2006

Interview with Malalai Joya

Last September Afghan parliamentarian Malalai Joya, who dared to criticise the presence of criminals and drug lords in government and was removed from the assembly as a consequence, visited Germany and met the *Foundation Initiative for a RAWA Support Association in Germany* for an interview. The following is an excerpt from the interview.

We had the chance to meet Malalai Joya and to talk to her amongst other things about the work of RAWA. She welcomed us with open arms and delighted: "I am proud of RAWA as Afghanistan's only women organization. I am no RAWA member myself, however, I hope that some day we will see a lot of organizations like this, because they are Afghanistan's future."

Why is RAWA so important for women's rights in Afghanistan?

"Let me first say some important words about the situation of women and children in Afghanistan, as they are the true victims of the war. Up to this day, there are numerous acts of violence against Afghan women. RAWA is the only organization that resists the fundamentalists. The majority of the Afghan people support RAWA. I'm glad that RAWA supports me, even though I'm no member. It's a good thing that they continue their work in spite of the high risks they face every day. If you look at the RAWA website, you realise that it is a site which radiates a lot of energy. You will also find there a lot of documents showing the risks of being a RAWA member. But that's exactly why the people in my country look up to RAWA and respect them. In Afghanistan, not only women fight for democracy, but also men. There are plenty of examples for that. I'm being supported and protected by men who would even sacrifice their own lives for me, e.g. my bodyguards. When I was talking to a RAWA member in New York, she told me that RAWA is supported by many men too. They are there for the organization whenever they are needed. Together, we aim to fight for equal rights. We believe in equality, therefore we do not want rights exclusively

for women, but for women and men. If there will be created a new democratic Afghan government, it will not be without male support. This is a path which women and men have to walk together."

Did the situation change, once the Taliban entered the country?

The Taliban are individuals with a medieval mindset, exactly like the Jihadis, who commit crimes in the name of Islam. Like them, the Taliban used Islam for their purposes. But after 9/11 the Northern Alliance, the Jihadis and all those criminals came to power and continued to commit crimes under the disguise of democracy and in the name of Islam, not only against women, but against the whole Afghan nation. They betray all people in the world. If we had a secular parliament there would be no chance for them to continue with their crimes."

So the problem in Afghanistan is political and not religious?

"Definitely! Without democracy, our country cannot develop. At the moment, Afghanistan is a very backward, male dominated country. A significant part of our intellectuals lived outside the country for a long time and now returns full of hope. The people are tired of the war and want to rebuild their country. Let me give you an example: If young women ask me for advice, because they wish to go to school, but their families do not allow it, I will talk to their fathers. I will specify the advantages of an education and often, they will be convinced. This is a simple example for the steps a democratic government can take to enlarge the knowledge of their population. Among those are education and women's rights, respectively human rights. In the movie "Enemies of Happiness" you can see that even men have no problem with taking advice from a young female democrat. No matter if old or young, they listen to my recommendations and this is a sign of hope. The people of Afghanistan are ready for freedom and liberation."

How do you feel facing the warlords and drug lords?

Of course it was quite painful for me when I was still in parliament. Not only did they threaten to kill me, but they threw water bottles at me and yelled: "Take her and rape her!" Such things would happen quite often, inside and outside the parliament building. When I was sitting in parliament, I would see a man who exploits my country on one side and a rapist on the other. It's not easy to be in one room with such people, right at the seat of our government. And if I expose them, they will switch off my microphone or throw me out, because they cannot tolerate the truth. But they will not silence me. No matter if I'll stay in parliament or not, I will continue my struggle against those fundamentalists. And I'm proud of the support by the Afghan people, who reject weapons and those who use them."

Are there well educated democrats who would be able to take over leadership of Afghanistan, in your view?

"There are plenty of well educated men and women who live in exile and are prepared for establishing democracy in their country. Some of them are already returning, but they lack the opportunities. Democratic magazines cannot publish their papers, because they don't have enough financial means. There are many difficulties, including safety problems. The main problem is that those fundamentalists are in power and only pretend that the government is democratic. Therefore I urge the people in Germany: Put pressure on your government that they act independently instead of following US politics, as it is only a

fake democracy. And try to support democratic forces in Afghanistan, because they have no other support. They are however our country's future. Our country does not consist of criminals, fundamentalists or drug lords. We have great people, but they are not given a chance. Those people are better than me, I merely want to serve my country and the women in my country. The international community should support these people, that would be a sign of hope for us. At the moment, our country is kind of occupied. We do not want to sacrifice our freedom for security. It is like that now. Neither men nor women are free in Afghanistan."

The full text of the interview is available at the News page of the SAWA website (www.sawa-australia.org).

Time to nominate candidates for the March AGM

The next Annual General Meeting will be held in March 2008. The invitation, which will include the list of candidates for election to the committee, will be mailed out with the next SAWAN in February. The current committee members are listed on the front page. They represent Adelaide, Sydney and Castlemaine. Having committee members from many cities around Australia makes SAWA a better national organization. Please consider whether you can nominate a candidate from your region for the committee. Send your nomination to info@sawa-australia.org or SAWA's PO Box before February.

JOIN SAWA HERE:

Name:.....
Organisation:
Address:.....
Post Code..... Phone:().....
Email:

I support the objectives of **SAWA**

Signed:.....Date:.....

(circle as appropriate):

Organisations: \$100.00

Individual \$20.00

Concession \$15.00

Student \$5.00

School \$10.00

Donation \$.....

TOTAL \$.....

(Pay by cheque, via Internet at www.sawa-australia.org or via direct deposit through your bank)



Please send a message to news@sawa-australia.org if you wish to receive the SAWAN by email rather than ordinary mail.