For the Editor

Turkey, France, Syria, Iraq ... so many fires are burning today that Afghanistan has disappeared from the news. If we are concerned about the state of the world and determined not to resign ourselves to inaction, should we not turn our attention to more prominent issues? There is no doubt that emergencies require action. But real change is only achieved through continuous work and determination. SAWA-Australia works to assist with the building of a new society, a society based on equal rights for women and men and a guarantee of freedom from tribal and religious oppression. In this edition of the SAWAN we look at the history of Afghanistan's struggle to achieve such a society and we introduce a small booklet that documents SAWA-Australia's contribution to that process.

Matthias Tomczak

Afghanistan’s long way into the 21st century

When we talk with others about Afghanistan we are often met with surprise when we say that Afghanistan was not always steeped in religious fundamentalism and century-old tribal traditions. In fact, Afghanistan's attempts to become a modern country reach back more than a century, to the time when Kemal Atatürk built a secular Turkey from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire and the October Revolution ended tsarist rule in Russia.

King Amanullah Khan, who obtained full independence from the British Empire in 1919 and established Afghanistan as a country with its own foreign policy, introduced far-reaching reforms that would have transformed Afghanistan. He discouraged the veil and the seclusion of women, abolished slavery and forced labour and introduced secular education for girls and boys as well as adult education classes and a court system based on secular penal, civil, and commercial codes.

Tribal opposition to Amanullah's secular reforms flared into open rebellion in 1923 and Amanullah's overthrow in 1928, followed by a civil war between various tribes that resulted in the looting and plundering of Kabul. Most of Amanullah’s reforms were annulled, while Sharia law was returned.

The second attempt to turn Afghanistan into a modern democratic state was undertaken by King Mohammed Zahir Shah, who reigned from 1933 until 1973. Free elections were introduced for a parliament, civil rights were guaranteed in the constitution, and women received equal rights before the law and the right to vote and stand for parliament.

King Mohammed Zahir Shah's progressive policies continued after Mohammed Daoud Khan deposed the king in a bloodless coup in 1973 and established a republic. But the cold war of the 1970s had strong repercussions in Afghanistan, given its geopolitical location between the two world powers.

Beginning in 1979 a series of coups and assassinations eventually led to the Soviet invasion. Secular rule and women's rights were strengthened during this time, but opposition from national as well as forces supported and financed by the USA led to Soviet withdrawal in 1989. The murderous civil wars of 1989 – 1996, followed by the rule of the Taliban government, spelled the end of civil progress and the return to Sharia law and the establishment of a fundamentalist society. It came to an end only in 2001 when the government fell and Afghanistan again entered a period of foreign occupation.

So where is the country today? After two attempts of modernisation, interrupted by two brutal periods of return to fundamentalist rule, are we again in a period of promising development?

The reality is that the situation is unlike anything Afghanistan has experienced in its long struggle to develop into a modern state. The occupying forces, who still maintain thousands of foreign troops in the country, express support for equal rights for women, the end of forced and under-age marriages, and a legal system based on human rights, but they tolerate the old tribal rulers whose actions during the civil wars were responsible for thousands of deaths in government positions and support a government that does deals with the worst war criminals. How can women obtain their freedom under such conditions?

The current situation is one of unresolved opposition between reactionary forces supported by the government and progressive forces represented by the common people. SAWA-Australia is determined to help the forces of the people to prevail and to prevent the comeback of the atrocities of the past.

Windows into Afghanistan, a new booklet

Afghanistan: 30 years of conflict, suicide bombings, civil war. That is what we see on our television screens, hear on the radio, read in the newspapers. Is there any hope?

Since 2004 SAWA-Australia, the Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan, has raised funds to enable the women of that war-torn country to make a difference. Supported by donations from hundreds of Australians who place their trust in the strength of Afghanistan’s women, the organisation has been able to assist women to work towards the building of a new Afghanistan, a country where every woman is safe and enjoys equal rights.

*See the Times and Guardian news story on page 2
terror will still be a daily occurrence, but hidden behind the violent images of our daily news are the beginnings of a new society. It is this new society that this booklet wants to show.

The booklet was sent to all current members. New members will receive it as a welcome gift. It is also available from the SAWA (SA) online shop where it can be read online in its entirety. Contents:

- Afghanistan's first woman taxi driver
- Afghan culture revived
- Women on bikes
- AFCECO's girl soccer team
- Rock concerts with a message
- The Afghan National Institute of Music
- Farkhunda's memorial
- The new Afghan woman
- International Women's Day in Farah province
- Women acquire skills for the modern world
- Women take control of their lives
- Women become decision makers
- A new generation of leaders

An old criminal is invited back into the country

The following report is from the Guardian of 14 May 2016.

The Afghan government is finalising a peace deal with the insurgent leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, possibly paving the way for a political return for one of the most notorious figures of Afghanistan’s modern history. Central to the deal is legal immunity from past crimes, including terrorist attacks.

Hekmatyar, who heads the Hezb-i-Islami militant group, was a prominent Pashtun commander during the anti-Soviet resistance and the pre-Taliban civil war, during which he indiscriminately shelled Kabul. Before disappearing into hiding in 1997, following the Taliban takeover, he racked up an almost unparalleled record of human rights abuses.

According to the draft deal, the government led by Ashraf Ghani will offer Hekmatyar amnesty for past offences, as well as safe havens inside Afghanistan for him and members of his movement.

The government will also release an “agreed list” of Hezb-i-Islami prisoners, and will help resettle 20,000 refugees from Pakistan, many of whom are thought to be Hekmatyar’s followers. While the government cannot on its own have Hekmatyar removed from international terror lists, a central demand of his, it promises to use “all resources and efforts” to remove penalties imposed on him.

If successful, Hekmatyar will not be the first alleged war criminal to reintegrate into post-2001 Afghan politics. Abdul Rashid Dostum, an Uzbek leader who was accused of suffocating Taliban prisoners in shipping containers, is now first vice-president. Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, whose followers committed ethnic massacres and who mentored 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, was a presidential candidate in 2014.

The Times of 11 May 2016 reports:

The Afghan government is finalising a peace deal with the Islamic militant group, was a prominent Pashtun commander during the anti-Soviet resistance and the pre-Taliban civil war, during which he indiscriminately shelled Kabul. Before disappearing into hiding in 1997, following the Taliban takeover, he racked up an almost unparalleled record of human rights abuses.

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Planet Wheeler supports Hamoon Clinic again

One of SAWA (SA)’s support projects is OPAWC’s Hamoon Clinic in Farah province. Our annual fundraising efforts have never been sufficient to allow us regular payments in support of the clinic, but we are fortunate to have Planet Wheeler, the private ancillary fund established in 2008 by the founders of Lonely Planet Publications Maureen and Tony Wheeler, as generous and reliable partners.

Since 2011 Planet Wheeler has supplied an ever increasing amount of base support for the clinic. SAWA (SA) has contributed on two occasions, first by raising the funds for a new ambulance through crowd funding, and last year by obtaining an ultrasound machine through the services of the DAK foundation.

We are grateful to Planet Wheeler for this continued support for an essential health service in a very poor province. We are also pleased that we can assist Planet Wheeler with the transfer of its funds through our bank connection in Pakistan, as sending money directly to Afghanistan is still problematic.

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OPAWC’s staff and students participated in the demonstration, but Afschar district in Kabul, where the Vocational Training Centre is located, is inhabited mainly by Hazara, and OPAWC always supports the just demands of the population. OPAWC director Latifa Ahmady reported that some staff and their relatives are among the victims and that OPAWC is now visiting hospitals and arranging funerals.

SAWA-Australia (SA) launched a special appeal for OPAWC bomb victims. $4,300 were raised in one week and sent to Afghanistan.

We will not be intimidated by terror and make sure that the life of the people of Afghanistan will improve regardless.

A new art project is being planned

One of the students sponsored by SAWA (SA) members is Zarmina. Her dream is to become a sculptor and contribute to the cultural expression of her country. We have been discussing with her a project for which we intend to apply to the Graham F. Smith Peace Foundation for a grant.

Zarmina will produce two sculptures, one for Kabul and one for Adelaide, of two women, one Afghan, the other Australian. To indicate the friendship between the people of Australia and Afghanistan the two women will hold two pitchers from which water flows into a bowl, joining into a single stream on the way.

The decision on the grant can be expected in October. Zarmina is quite excited about the project, as are we. Should the application not be successful we intend to proceed through a crowd funding drive later in the year. And we hope to have Zarmina here in Adelaide with one of her sculptures for the opening event.

Bomb victims appeal

On 23 July a huge crowd protested against a planned change in the route of a new powerline, that will connect Turkmenistan with Kabul, so that it bypasses Bamiyan province, where many Hazara live in poverty and had hoped that the new powerline would bring electricity to them. The issue has been simmering for months and has led to a first massive demonstration on 16 March. The demonstration on 23 July brought an even larger crowd on to the streets.

During the demonstration two suicide bombers detonated cars as the crowd passed, killing indiscriminately men, women and children, with at least 80 people dead and 200 injured. We do not know how many of
OUR NEW PROJECT IN AFGHANISTAN WITH OPAWC

We are in close contact with OPAWC as it struggles to set up its new project promoting women’s literacy and wage earning skills in Jalalabad in the province of Nangarha. This area is close to the Pakistan border and troubled by considerable Taliban activity. OPAWC estimate that running costs will be US $11,160 (about A$15,000) for the first year of operations. The primary cost will be salaries for teachers and security guards. The program will run in rented and inconspicuous premises, probably a house. In addition, there are set-up costs for purchase of computers, furniture and solar panels + batteries. The latter will allow the project to run independent of the electricity grid, without recurring costs and undisturbed by blackouts. We have already sent US$ 7,474 (Approx A$10,000) to purchase these items.

CHAIR OF AFGHAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION VISIT TO AUSTRALIA

Dr Sima Samar, the Chair of this commission made a brief visit to Sydney before travelling to Melbourne and to Canberra to meet with politicians and bureaucrats to discuss the use of Australian aid to further human rights in Afghanistan. SAWA-NSW Convenor, Shirley Allen, attended her talk at UTS recently when Dr Samar spoke of her early work as a doctor in Pakistan and her ongoing efforts to progress and protect women in Afghanistan. She stressed the importance of the Law for the Prevention of Violence against Women which has often been under attack in Parliament and continues to be difficult for women to access and use. She emphasised that its effectiveness will only be realised with cultural change in both Afghan men and women.

CANADIAN EFFORrts FOR WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

The work of Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan (CW4WAfghan) has recently been highlighted by the award of an Honorary Doctor of Laws degree at the University of Calgary to its co-founder and voluntary executive director, Janice Eisenhower. The degree was awarded in recognition of her work for Afghan women and highlighted that CW4WA has raised more than $7 million and implemented hundreds of educational projects in Afghanistan. This honor, is bestowed upon Canadian individuals whose notable achievements and community service merit recognition.

BOOK RECOMMENDATION

A recent publication, “We are Afghan Women - Voices of Hope” would be of interest to members and supporters. It is a collection of about 30 life stories from Afghan women of varying ages and experiences, who have all become successful leaders in their own communities or professions. Of special interest is the contribution by Nasima Rahmani who came to UTS in 2005 on a scholarship from UNIFEM (now UN Women Australia) to do a Masters degree in law. The book is published by Simon & Schuster in 2016 for the George W. Bush Institute and has an insightful introduction by Laura Bush giving a brief recent history and some of her work in promoting women’s issues.

RECENT EVENTS

A very successful dinner at Bamiyan Restaurant in May and generous donations in response to our appeal for funds, allowed us to send the set-up costs to our new project as above. It was again an enjoyable occasion with Afghan food selected by our generous host, Haseeb Miazad and greatly appreciated by the 46 people who came. Profit was close to $2,000 with the help of raffle ticket sales.

A second showing of “Frame by Frame” a presentation of the work of four Afghan photo-journalists, was attended by over 30 people on Sunday, 10th July at the Balmain Uniting Church. The documentary included rare photographs taken in the Taliban period when photography was banned and severely punished. The event raised $750.

DATES FOR DIARY

Friday 16th September, 2016: Jennifer Gowen will talk about her time in Afghanistan as an artist-in-residence. 11.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m.- PowerPoint presentation and talk. Venue: Sydney Mechanics School of Arts, Level 1, 280 Pitt Street, Sydney Cost: $25.

Thursday 20 October, 2016: AGM followed by Speaker and light refreshments at 6.30 pm, Balmain Uniting Church 344 Darling St, Balmain. The speaker will be Jan Forrester journalist/media trainer.

Thursday, 17th November: Annual Lunch returning to the Leichhardt Rowing Club, Glover Street, Leichhardt. More details later.

Haseeb’s staff who prepared the delicious food and looked after us so well, thank you.