A visit to Kabul, March 2019

The circumstances of SAWA-Australia have made it impossible to visit OPAWC’s Vocational Training Centre for quite some time. We publish here a report of a visit by CISDA, the Italian charity that supports a range of Afghan organisations including AFCECO and OPAWC and visits Afghanistan every year.

Kabul, for those of us from the CISDA who go there every year, always presents itself in the same way: chaotic, dusty, with traffic without rules, open sewers, drug addicts at every corner, crossed by a wounded humanity, what an effort to do anything, leaving home in the morning without knowing if the evening will come back. At least three refugee camps remain within the city; in what we have had the opportunity to visit, which has been there for 12 years, 7000 people live in mud houses or tents, without water or light, where dozens of children dressed up and without shoes play in the mud and in open sewers. People to whom the government has never given any response and who have been asked to leave, without offering any alternative.

The attacks are continuous; even during our brief stay there were two against the Hazara community, which was celebrating the Nawroz. Even celebrating New Year in Afghanistan has become a revolutionary act, which the Taliban, Daesh and other terrorist groups believe is right to punish with bombs.

And the attacks produce many more civilian victims than the government normally declares publicly, also thanks to completely enslaved media: the number is usually divided by four, to make the situation of the country appear less serious than it is, to make believe that everything is going in the direction of a peaceful resolution.

And the losses of the Afghan troops are also hidden, who reached, in this guilty silence, the number of 45,000 only in the last year.

In Kabul, before the forty years of wars that crossed it, there lived a million and a half people, now the inhabitants are seven million. They escape from the fighting that does not cease in every province of the country, they look for something to do to feed the family, a shelter.
No one in the country takes seriously the "peace talks" with the Taliban, which are not a monolithic group like before, but divided by gangs: among these, there are those who deal with the US, some with the Russians, some with the Iranians, some with Pakistan, some with China. The Saudis have launched millionaire projects in Farah and Herat; a way to closely monitor Iran, their sworn enemy. Another piece of this endless war chessboard.

"Negotiations with the Taliban are an even more dangerous situation than war," Malalai tells us, still forced underground, "because it could lead to new civil wars; moreover, on the altar of the so-called "peace", human rights and women's rights will be sacrificed in a legal manner. A false peace without justice, which will not lead to any positive outcome ".

With the Solidarity Party – Hambastagi we participated in a street event to commemorate Farkhunda, barbarously killed 4 years ago in front of a mosque in central Kabul with the false accusation of having burned a copy of the Koran. Participation is high, even if the police, under the pretext of security, prevent many from entering the area where the event takes place.

We spoke with Najia Rahil, the Farkhunda lawyer who is part of the independent association of Afghan lawyers. The case has now been closed with the conviction of only two people who are not the main perpetrators of the murder; apparently, the three real perpetrators have been released, others have fled. Najia asked for an appeal process, which is unlikely to be granted. The process will only be reopened if the fugitives are captured, but there are not many hopes. Hambastagi now has 43,000 members in all the provinces of the country, a very considerable number, considering the conditions in which they are forced to work: they have a political committee, an organizational committee, a women commission (in which the males participate, also if women keep autonomous spaces for themselves), a commission of teachers. Everyone is asked to contribute financially to the life of the party and each must put himself at the service of his community, within the scope of his competences; teachers, doctors, architects, photographers, musicians, engineers ... everyone must engage in basic work.

They talk about wanting to make a revolution, specifying that for them it does not mean armed revolution "because", they say, "people are tired of war". Revolution for them is to use direct language, which defines war criminals, the corrupt, drug traffickers for what they are and not people "who made mistakes". Revolution is also bringing schools, culture, political awareness among people, to be able to join the opposition in the country. Revolution is a denunciation of crimes and occupation, which they regularly do with their public initiatives.

Selay Ghaffar, the spokeswoman, who is often called on television to confront the worst figures in the country, is very popular and much loved; after the event for Farkhunda she had 10 journalists around him and in the evening she was asked to make statements in a broadcast. Her life is difficult, and the security measures around her are very tight, but she decided that it is worth risking your life too in order to change things and certainly you will not be intimidated by threats.

Our journey closes in a village in the south east of the country, where, thanks to the will of the local tribal leaders and to international solidarity, families from different provinces are arriving to find a place to live, where a school for 150 children has risen, 40 women attend literacy classes and the foundation stone for a clinic was laid that will offer free health care and safety for women; a tangible demonstration of how much can be done with little.


Negotiations with the Taliban

There is real concern among Afghan women. They are afraid of paying for the American attempt to negotiate the end of eighteen years of war with the Taliban. Eighteen years of endless war and a political failure to build a viable, self-defeating state may turn against those who have the most to lose.

Negotiations are underway with the Taliban: they are still far from successful, but advanced enough to revive the anguish of a past barely overcome.

Talks have been going on for months between the Taliban and the Americans. But today was to be an unprecedented meeting in Qatar, between representatives of the Taliban and a delegation of 250 people from Kabul, Afghan government and society. This meeting was postponed at the last minute because the Taliban did not recognize the presence of Afghan government members around the table. They give no legitimacy to the government of Kabul, considered a creation of the United States. This small humiliation is obviously ominous, especially as the Taliban are more active than ever on the military side. They launched their traditional spring-time offensive as the Doha meeting was being set, a way to show that they do not argue in a weak position.

The great fear of the Afghans is a Vietnamese scenario, that is to say a peace agreement allowing the United States to withdraw from a quagmire, at the expense of their local allies who will not make the weight against their enemies.

At the time, in 1973, Henry Kissinger had hoped for a “decency period” before North Vietnam swallowed the South; the Afghans fear today to see the scenario to be renewed with a Donald Trump who cares little about the fate of Afghanistan or even strategic balances in Asia. Its only requirement is that the Taliban commit to no longer sheltering terrorist groups like Al Qaida, the cause of their intervention, after September 11, 2001. What is the fate of women in this equation?
Health issues impinge on the future of SAWA

A personal message from the convener

When I was born in Germany 78 years ago, World War II was still forging ahead. It was over when I entered primary school. Fascism had been defeated militarily, but the battle for the minds had only just begun.

The official position was of course that fascism had been crushed and did not have a future in the new post-war Germany. East Germany was strict in that regard, so any Nazi who did not want to end in jail had to go into hiding to South America or South Africa or to the West, where he could continue to work in public office, helped by their wartime connections. Every now and then the discovery of a prominent Nazi in the Diplomatic Corps or the High Court sparked often violent protests and kept the political argument alive.

The political controversy intensified in the course of the Cold War and helped many people to support the liberation forces of the Korean War and the Viet Kong in the Vietnam War, following the My Lai massacre in 1968. It also brought the situation of the depressed people in Africa and South America into sharper focus.

In Germany fascism had broken the tradition of determined socialist parliamentary support, and with it a strong international solidarity movement. This resulted in rapid growth of neo-Marxist forces and confrontation with the conservative forces supporting the government. Campaigns to support the liberation forces in what soon was to become Zimbabwe and the military struggle for the liberation of Eritrea found wide support of the public and fierce opposition from governments.

I can clearly remember going from door to door with a donation tin asking for money to buy weapons for Zimbabwe's guerrilla army and watching the public event when an armoured vehicle bought from the collected donations was shipped to "Rhodesia". At the same time the police would arrest everyone who was found putting up posters authorized by a Marxist organisation. In the end government attempts to suppress involvement of Marxist organisations in public activities produced an Act that members of such organisations had to be banned from public service. I lost my job at the university and had to look around for employment in another country.

When I came to Australia in 1979 I found quite a different world. On one hand, the police would not arrest me for putting up posters for an event in support of the liberation struggle in Eritrea; they would simply send me off with a "don't do that". On the other hand international solidarity did not get the same support as in Europe, and confrontations were more subdued. The invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 brought a short-lived change, leading to the establishment of SAWA in 2004. For a short period SAWA had active local groups around the country and could develop an efficient support network for the women of Afghanistan.

Today the situation is quite different. One cannot say that society is less politicised, but international solidarity is no longer at the forefront of the movement. The major topic of concern is Climate Change, which brings hundreds of thousands on the streets and has led to rising political awareness of the younger generations. Supporting a literacy and training centre or a hospital in Afghanistan is no longer a burning issue, and SAWA's fundraising is now mainly in response of our newsletter and online donation facility, where our donation pattern has changed from many small donations raised at events to fewer but regular monthly donations from very generous donors.

I do have the support of a devoted committee, but over the last few years most fundraising activities relied on my initiative. This has led to major successes, such as the donation of an ambulance and the establishment of SAWA (NSW), who does excellent work. But dependence on my work for SAWA cannot go on forever.

In December 2016 I was diagnosed with a rare form of stomach cancer and have been in treatment ever since. Lately my health has gone down dramatically, and I find it difficult to do tasks such as putting together the SAWAN. So this will be my last newsletter. The future of SAWA will be with the SAWA (SA) and SAWA (NSW) committees. I wish them every success with their work.

Memories of the past
RECENT REPORT ON OUR PROJECT IN QALATAK VILLAGE

Qalatak is a small remote village in the Khewa district of Nangarhar province. Nangarhar has a heavy presence of Taliban and now mostly ISIS. Most of the girls' schools were closed during the year and boys attend Madrassas that are managed by Taliban or ISIS. It is quite difficult to implement projects that are focused on women’s empowerment. There are real threats from the extremists against girls’ education.

Qalatak was chosen, because despite the conservative nature of Nangarhar, it is quite open minded. It had a past history of women's education. Also, most of its inhabitants are internally displaced people from neighbouring provinces or people returning from Pakistan after that country began expelling Afghan refugees. The project includes three main activities for women and girls:

**Tailoring**: offered to 30 women who are illiterate - the only such course in the area. They are taught the basics of, measuring, cutting and sewing. Basic literacy lessons are also included because measurement is essential for tailoring. Once a week they also watch educational movies which concern social, cultural and health issues. These offer practical solutions to their everyday life problems with a particular emphasis on necessary precautions in pregnancy and the medical help needed to avoid complications and ultimately death, which is unfortunately very high among Afghan women.

**English**: This course is taught to school girls who are able to read and write.

**Computer**: This course is also taught to schoolgirls who can read and write. Such a course is very unusual as most people in this area have never seen a computer and have no knowledge of its functioning. The girls are first familiarised with the hardware of computers and then taught its basic functions and some basic programs such as Microsoft Office Word and Excel. They are now learning how to type and use the computer for their studies and home work.

It is gratifying that there is a great demand for the courses and a number of students have found employment as a result of the courses.

**RECENT EVENTS**

The annual BIRTHING KIT ASSEMBLY was held on Monday March 4th 2019 at the Leichhardt Rowing Club. This very successful event, with nearly 60 people attending, is a good way for SAWA to publicise the difficulties of women in underdeveloped countries especially Afghanistan. The day also attracts quite a number of new faces, many of whom become SAWA supporters. 1000 kits were assembled and Bronwyn Monro organised an excellent morning tea. Donations covered the cost of $3.00 for each kit.

Next year the cost of kits materials from the Birthing Kit Foundation will rise to $5.00 per kit. In order to keep this specific fundraising to the same level, the Committee has decided to trial assembling 600 kits costing $3,000 as before. The limitation will be reviewed if more funds are received but with an almost doubling of the budget from our project in Nangarhar Province the Committee feels that we are overstretched in fundraising and that $5,000 for the kits would impact on what we can do for our core project.

**A SAWA -NSW Information Stail** was held on 7th March at Petersham as part of the International Women's Day celebrations organised by the Inner West Council. We were pleased to display our new banner and provide information. There was a small fundraising return from donations and the sale of our bags.

**COMING EVENTS**

**Biennial Dinner** • Wednesday 8 May 2019 6.30 for 7.00 at The Kazbah Restaurant, 379 Darling St Balmain (Opposite the Post Office). Cost: $75.00 Drinks available. Booking is essential Email to: bookings.nsw@sawa-australia.org or phone Shirley 98185319. After booking please pay either by posted cheque or direct deposit to Bendigo Bank referencing surname and dinner (Details on the header above)

Please notify your payment to treasurer.nsw@sawa-australia.org

**FILM** • Saturday June 1, 5.30pm-8.30pm The Judge at the Hannaford Centre 608 Darling St, Rozelle NSW 2039. Drinks and Nibbles before. Cost $25.00. Please book by Email to bookings.nsw@sawa-australia.org or phone Shirley 98185319. This film has been described as "a Middle Eastern Trailblazer on the Upholding of Women's Rights." and as a “warm hearted” documentary. It features the life of Khoudlal al-Faqih, the first woman to be appointed, in 2009, to the Middle East's religious courts.