



Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan

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

## FROM THE SECRETARY

July saw some important changes to the structure of SAWA's organization. At the AGM of 27 July 2010, members decided to restructure SAWA to enable the formation of state associations which can incorporate independently in their state and work cooperatively through a national SAWA Network Forum. A new Constitution was adopted which serves as a model constitution for these state associations. A change was made to the name of the organization; SAWA-Australia is now known as SAWA-Australia (SA). If a group decides to incorporate in a state other than SA, that group replaces (SA) with the abbreviation of their state.

We hope that this new structure for SAWA will facilitate further growth and efficiency and lead to increased membership. We hope that these changes result in this wonderful organization being able to work even more effectively for the women, girls and boys of Afghanistan!

In this SAWAN you will read about life in Kabul in the 50's and 60's, when Afghan women had the freedom to pursue a bright future. Contrast this to the reality of Afghanistan today, devastated by three decades of war; where the majority of women are illiterate, where 1 out of every 8 will die in childbirth, where women resort to self-immolation in response to acts of violence towards them.

Debate rages about the war in Afghanistan; whether sending in foreign troops has made or will ever make an improvement in the lives of Afghan people. Should the foreign forces stay or leave or try to reconcile with the Taliban? SAWA encourages this debate but in the meantime gets on with the business of supporting – and with your help expanding – our two major projects, namely Hewad High School in Pakistan and the Vocational Training Centre in Kabul.

We are privileged to publish in this edition of the SAWAN a compelling poem by internationally acclaimed poet, Elyas Alavi, born in Afghanistan and currently residing in South Australia.

Barbara James

## Photos from Hewad High School

My report on my visit to Hewad High School in the last SAWAN included photos from two classrooms. The students looked dedicated and carefree, and the classrooms, although small and simple, looked spotless.

In this edition I want to show that much more support is needed to bring everything in the school up to the same standard. The school building is an ordinary residential house.



This class is housed in what was the kitchen of the residence. It is clearly not suitable as a classroom, but there is a shortage of rooms in the building, so the kitchen will have to do.



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## SAWA OBJECTIVES

- Raise funds to assist in development and relief projects 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:** Yvonne Allen

**Assistant Convener:** Sing Ting Ping

**Secretary:** Barbara James

**Treasurer:** Christine Tomczak

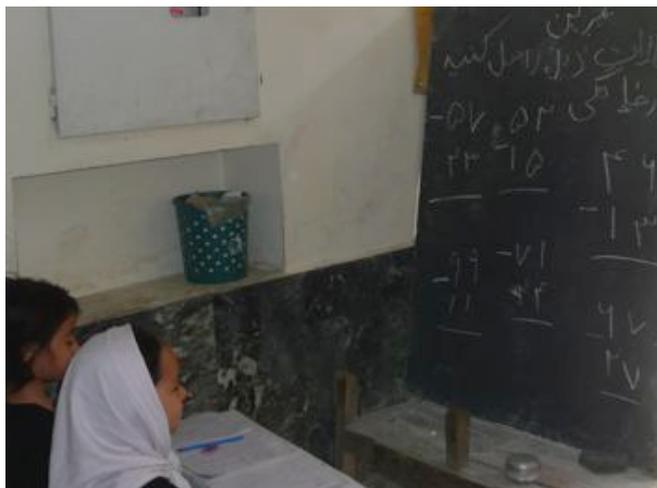
**Committee:** Carmel Chiu-Sutcliffe, Helen Fletcher, Kath Jones

**Newsletter Editor:** Matthias Tomczak

**Public Officer:** Ruth Redfern

**Auditor:** Bob Shahinger

The second photo on the front page shows the "chemistry lab", created by installing a partition on the first floor landing.



Even the better classrooms leave much to be desired. Maybe a comparison with women's lives in Kabul half a century ago can inspire us to raise even more funds so that Afghan girls of today can enjoy what their parents and grandparents could take for granted.

Matthias Tomczak

### Kabul in the 1950s and 1960s

By Mohammad Qayoumi

On a recent trip to Afghanistan, British Defense Secretary Liam Fox drew fire for calling it "a broken 13th-century country." The most common objection was not that he was wrong, but that he was overly blunt. He's hardly the first Westerner to label Afghanistan as medieval. Former Blackwater CEO Erik Prince recently described the country as inhabited by "barbarians" with "a 1200 A.D. mentality." Many assume that's all Afghanistan has ever been -- an ungovernable land where chaos is carved into the hills. Given the images people see on TV and the headlines written about Afghanistan over the past three decades of war, many conclude the country never made it out of the Middle Ages.

But that is not the Afghanistan I remember. I grew up in Kabul in the 1950s and '60s. When I was in middle school, I remember that on one visit to a city market, I bought a photo book about the country published by Afghanistan's planning ministry. Recently I received again a copy of the book and recognized it as a time capsule of the Afghanistan I had once known -- perhaps a little airbrushed by government officials, but a far more realistic picture of my homeland than one often sees today.

A half-century ago, Afghan women pursued careers in medicine; men and women mingled casually at movie theatres and university campuses in Kabul; factories in the suburbs churned out textiles and other goods. There was a tradition of law and order, and a government capable of undertaking large national infrastructure projects, like building hydropower stations and roads, albeit with outside help. Ordinary people had a sense of hope, a belief that education could open opportunities for all, a conviction that a bright future lay ahead. All that has been destroyed by three decades of war, but it was real.

Some captions in the book are difficult to read today: "Afghanistan's racial diversity has little meaning except to an ethnologist. Ask any Afghan to identify a neighbour and he calls him only a brother." But it is important to know that disorder, terrorism, and violence against schools that educate girls are not inevitable. I want to show Afghanistan's youth of today how their parents and grandparents really lived.



Slightly abridged from *Foreign Policy* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), 27 May 2010

### Big plans for the Vocational Training Centre

The last SAWAN already documented the great advances the Vocational Training Centre has made over the last 12 months. Many women already moved on from the literacy programme to handicraft production, and the Centre's showroom is



Students greet the SAWA visitor with their own writings. On the left are the Principal Adila and teacher Fahima.

overflowing with garments, bags and ornamental items. Latifa, the Centre's director, has big plans. She wants to develop a marketing system for the Centre's products and is already busy preparing the budget for a commercial production system. A market assessment identified traditional Afghan embroidery as the most promising product, because that kind of article finds good markets among Afghans around the world. To get the system started will require significant start-up funds but will eventually guarantee self-sufficiency. SAWA can be really proud to have started the Centre in 2008 and should make every effort to get it to self-sufficiency.



*On the way to the Vocational Training Centre.*

### **Why foreign forces are a threat to the future of Afghanistan's women**

"Disguised in boys' clothes, two girls aged 13 and 14 had been fleeing for two days along rutted roads and over mountain passes into Herat Province to escape their illegal, forced marriages to much older men. A police officer spotted them as girls, ignored their pleas and sent them back to their remote village in Ghor Province. There they were publicly and viciously flogged for daring to run away from their husbands. Their tormentors, who videotaped the abuse, were not the Taliban, but local mullahs and the former warlord, now a pro-government figure who largely rules the district where the girls live."

This report, from *The New York Times* of 30 May, clearly documents what RAWA has been saying all along: that the Taliban are only one of the fundamentalist forces in the country and that many of the "former" warlords who now represent the government have the same misogynist attitude. The report continues:

"From 2000 to 2008, the brides in 43 percent of Afghan marriages were under 18. Although the Afghan Constitution forbids the marriage of girls under the age of 16, tribal customs often condone marriage once puberty is reached, or even earlier. Flogging is also illegal.

Forced into a so-called marriage exchange, where each girl was given to an elderly man in the other's family, the girls later complained that their husbands beat them when they tried to resist consummating the unions. Dressed as boys, they escaped. (...)

In some ways, the two girls from Ghor were among the luckier child brides. After the floggings, the mullah declared them divorced and returned them to their own families. Two years earlier, in nearby Murhab district, two girls who had been sold

into marriage to the same family fled after being abused, according to a report by the Human Rights Commission. But they lost their way, were captured and forcibly returned. Their fathers — one the village mullah — took them up the mountain and killed them."

It should be clear from these reports that if the aim of the foreign intervention is to help the Afghan people the first objective should be to eliminate the warlords from power. But what do the foreign troops achieve? *The New York Times* reports on 21 June:

"American taxpayers have inadvertently created a network of warlords across Afghanistan who are making millions of dollars escorting NATO convoys and operating outside the control of either the Afghan government or the American and NATO militaries, according to the results of a Congressional investigation released Monday.

The investigation, begun last year by the House Subcommittee for National Security, found that money given to these Afghan warlords often amounts to little more than mafia-style protection payments, with some NATO convoys that refused to pay the warlords coming under attack. (...)

'Long after the United States leaves Afghanistan, and the convoy security business shuts down, these warlords will likely continue to play a major role as autonomous centers of political, economic and military power,' the report said."

Warlords who order the flogging of 13 year old girls, installed as long-term autonomous centres of power through our intervention – the US government report could not express it more clearly: The future for Afghanistan's women is bleak, and our governments carry a large part of the responsibility for this.

*Matthias Tomczak*

The full reports from *The New York Times*, including a video of the flogging, can be accessed from SAWA's web page [www.sawa-australia.org/news.html](http://www.sawa-australia.org/news.html)

### **Malalai Joya receives recognition in Spain**



*In June the Spanish women's magazine Yo Dona gave one of its international awards this year to Malalai Joya. Yo Dona writes in a press statement:*

Spring is already here, and YO DONA celebrated its arrival with a grand event with many well known faces. Malalai Yoya and Benedetta Tagliabue received their awards for humanitarian work and professional work

respectively. Personalities from the world of politics, fashion, culture and society gathered with the magazine for the fifth handing over of its international wards.

The director of YO DONA remembered how the awards began: "We are fully aware of their international profile and the profile of the awardees", she said. And a good example for this are this year's two awardees: a young Afghan parliamentarian who fights the Taliban regime and the architect who designed the Spanish pavilion at the Shanghai Expo.

### Reports from local groups and donors

The outstanding local group for this period was **Perth**. The group organized a movie fundraiser with *The Hedgehog* on Sunday 25 July. It attracted 108 SAWA supporters and raised almost \$2000, half from selling tickets, two-thirds of the remainder from donations and the rest from the raffle.

Many thanks to SAWA workers who made the day a success: Sarah Leighton, Flora Smith, Myrna Tonkinson, Priscilla Horne, Pauline Masters, Elio Novello. and to all the friends and supporters of SAWA who purchased tickets or made a donation - or in some cases both!

Also in Perth is the **Theosophical Order of Service**, a regular supporter of SAWA. We gratefully acknowledge several donations adding up to over \$1,000 this year.

In Melbourne Janet Watson-Kruse collected donations on her mother's birthday to establish the **Stella Watson scholarship** for literacy training. \$750 was raised and sent to the Vocational Training Centre to strengthen its literacy programme.

Stella, who was a literacy teacher herself, will be honoured by having part of the programme named after her. Centre director Latifa promises us a photo when everything is in place. We look forward to receiving it for inclusion in a later SAWAN.

Our sponsors **Andersen Bowe Pty. Ltd.** sent several donations, well above their sponsorship requirements.

Among our major supporters, who in the last months sent donations of hundred dollars or more, were Beth Gaze, Ian Ross and Jill Parliament, Maria Woodgate, Jane Hamilton and Henry Collins, and the Zonta Club of Noarlunga.

Special acknowledgements go to a donor who does not want to be named but for the second year running sent \$1,000, a consultant to a publisher who donated his \$2,000 fee, and to Arun Thakur, whose donations this year reached \$1,120.

### She had beautiful eyes

Elyas Alavi (علوی الیاس) is an internationally renowned poet known particularly throughout Iran as well as in his homeland Afghanistan. He is also a highly gifted painter and is currently studying Visual Arts at the University of South Australia. Presently living in Adelaide, Alavi is an active member of the community and is recognized for his role in the Dorr-e Dari Foundation Centre, which celebrates the cultural and literary personalities among the Afghan community in Adelaide.

Alavi's poems depict realities and fragments of lives that are very far from what most of us experience on a daily basis here

in Australia. His poems take us on a journey to his homeland, where we are privileged yet saddened by the events that he recalls for us. Alavi visits many issues in his poetry, but mainly he speaks of exile, social justice, family, gender issues, separation and human nature. This amazing poet has generously allowed us to publish poems from his acclaimed book *I'm a Daydreamer Wolf* (سرتم خیالبافی گرگ من) published in Iran in 2008. His second book will be released in 2010.

*Carmel Chiu-Sutcliffe*

Elyas' web blog (in Farsi) is at [www.elyasalavi.blogfa.com](http://www.elyasalavi.blogfa.com), and he can be contacted via [elyasalavi@gmail.com](mailto:elyasalavi@gmail.com).

She had beautiful eyes  
and the old men of the quarter all wished  
that they had been born later

Don't put on your glasses  
The world isn't worth looking at  
Nobody knows  
With what crime the history of your eyes began  
You were four years old  
When your brothers raped you  
You had to be buried alive  
Father  
was a sacred monkey

The Bedouin mysteriously kidnapped you  
And the taverns flourished and trade was brisk  
A girl collecting stones in the folds of her skirt  
Saw you for the last time in Jerusalem.

Years later the remains of your eyelids were  
discovered in the Lascaux caves  
Hitler hunted for your eyes among Jewish women  
When a bad air hung over Paris  
A bad air over Paris

Sometimes to stay alive you have to smile  
shout slogans  
write poetry

And fearing the officials of the migration office  
You came to Iran along with the Polish refugees  
And Shamlu\* wrote:

*Behind the pupils of your eyes  
which prisoner's cry is there  
That throws freedom onto swollen lips  
Like a red rose?*

A thousand years later  
For a thousand years  
In the mudbrick palaces of Kabul  
You had to bury your eyes beneath a burqa  
And that was too much for the Buddha...  
He committed suicide  
If only you had known  
the old men of the quarter all wished  
that you had been born earlier.

\*Ahmad Shamlu was a major modern Iranian poet.  
Translated from Farsi by Dr Zuzanna Olszewska from Oxford University