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Pakistan and Afghanistan: A Fragile Peace or a Precipice

By Marie Dennis

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In mid June, I had the opportunity to travel to Pakistan with Dave Robinson, National Coordinator of *Pax Christi USA*, and to Afghanistan with a larger interfaith delegation coordinated by Global Exchange. The purpose was to bring a message of solidarity to the people of these two countries in the context of the U.S. war on terrorism and to listen to the wisdom and experience of the people there in order to help promote peace and stability.

This brief visit to Pakistan and Afghanistan provided some understanding of the extremely difficult reality there, enormous respect for the amazing peacemaking efforts taking place in Pakistan, and fragile steps toward a more stable society after 23 years of war in Afghanistan. The roots of the present crisis in South and Central Asia are deep and cannot be ignored if there is ever to be a lasting solution. They are historical, political, economic, cultural, religious, ethnic—local, regional and global.

Pakistan

In Pakistan our small delegation was hosted by *Caritas Pakistan* and *Caritas Lahore* in Lahore and by Catholic Bishop Joseph Coutts in Faisalabad. We met with staff and commission members of the National Commission for Justice and Peace of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Pakistan, the Justice and Peace Commission of the Major Superiors of Religious in Pakistan, the Justice and Peace and Human Rights Commission of the Diocese of Faisalabad and



Marie Dennis, Vice-President of *Pax Christi International*

other key Catholic leaders in the country. The lens through which we looked at Pakistan was that of the minority Catholic community.

Christians and other minority groups in Pakistan live under the yoke of serious discrimination that is expressed in both law and practice. In fact, Pakistan as a whole is being held hostage by a small minority of fundamentalist Muslims through a dangerous interpretation of the blasphemy law. A person accused by anyone of blasphemy is considered guilty until proven innocent. A guilty verdict carries a mandatory death sentence—too often implemented by assassination even if a person is acquitted.

This reality, joined with the fact that Christians are automatically associated with the West, makes that community enormously vulnerable when rage against the U.S. surges among Muslims, as it did during the bombing of Afghanistan. Yet, their response to a dangerous situation was profoundly inspiring. Despite several deadly at-

tempts to assassinate them, they have remained steadfastly loyal to their faith and their country. Their response to a dangerous situation was profoundly inspiring. Despite several deadly at-

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tacks by extremists on Christian churches, the official and deliberate reaction of the Christian community was to invite their Muslim brothers and sisters, who themselves vehemently opposed the violence, to join with them in a project promoting social harmony. In every parish in the country interfaith peace committees were established. Muslims and Christians joined together to address local human needs. One such peace committee we visited was building a community center in their impoverished neighborhood where most workers were garbage collectors. In other instances, Muslims, Christians and others joined in public demonstrations for peace and social harmony.

The possibility of war with India was quite real while we were in Pakistan. All the villages along the Indian border had been evacuated, disrupting lives. Tensions were extremely high in Kashmir. Yet, people-to-people peacemaking efforts between Pakistanis and Indians were very active.

The deep criticism of U.S. policy by many Catholics we spoke to in the region echoed that of their Muslim brothers and sisters. It was not, however, particularly focused on the U.S. bombing campaign in Afghanistan, but on the inconsistency, “ad-hoc-ness,” and shallow self-interest that led the U.S. to repeatedly renege on commitments to South Asia and fail to play the positive leadership role required by its super power status. Many people were somewhat ambivalent about the bombing in Afghanistan. On the one hand, they said that Al Qaeda and the Taliban are extremely dangerous—the U.S. role in their early development and the events of September 11th put the onus on the U.S. to respond in a definitive manner. On the other hand, the people of Afghanistan were innocent and already devastated by war, extremism and dreadful poverty. To worsen their plight was unconscionable, and the results of the bombing in terms of terrorism are very unclear.

There are long-term solutions that must be engaged. Primary among them is education. Repeatedly, we

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heard the cry for education—good, accessible education that can counteract the worst of the extremist training being offered in some, though not all, of the madrassas. (We visited one fine madrassa run by Pir Muhammed Ibrahim, a Muslim friend of Bishop Coutts—and there are many more.)

Of equal importance is economic justice. Poverty is extreme in Pakistan and the gap between the rich and the poor is great. External debt is overwhelming. Jobs are non-existent for the poor. And conflict over land is intense. The budget of Pakistan

assigns roughly 47% to external debt service, 35% to the military, 2% to education, 1% to health care and 6% to development.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is afflicted with poverty as severe as anywhere else in the world. Thirty-seven thousand five hundred street children, who are the principal breadwinners for their families, inhabit Kabul. Almost a fourth of the children die before their fifth birthday. Life expectancy is 48 years for men and 49 for women. Only a small fraction has access to potable water. There is one medical doctor for every 50,000 people. There is almost no infrastructure, including paved roads, outside of the capital city.

Somewhat better off 30 years ago, with an extremely rich history and culture, Afghanistan has been nearly totally destroyed by 23 years of war. From the Soviet war of the 1980s, through intense factional fighting and the Taliban war of the 1990s, to the U.S. war on terrorism in 2001-2002, the poor majority of Afghanistan have been pummeled time and time again.

We could only glimpse the reality in the week we were there, but the picture is sobering. Kabul, the impoverished capital of Afghanistan was our base. A

city decimated repeatedly, including during the most recent war, Kabul yet sustains signs of life. There was evident and universal relief at the departure of the Taliban, for which the U.S. is given credit. Now people are engaged in a slow, deliberate reconstruction of life at every level. Buildings destroyed during the conflicts are being repaired. Commercial activity is amazingly energetic—hundreds of small shops and businesses have reopened to serve local residents and hoped-for tourists. Carts and wagons of every possible description, most pulled by hand, crisscross the city hauling lumber for building, wood for cooking, the necessities of life.

The United Nations sponsored International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) are quite visible in Kabul. Yet, security remains a very significant concern everywhere. We were strongly discouraged from travelling to many parts of the country where ISAF was not present and threats were very real. Warlords in different parts of the country maintain their own personal armies. The new government is attempting to build a multiethnic national army; but, thus far only 600 troops are ready, with another 600 in training. The potential for factional violence and instability is obvious.

Some of the most vulnerable Afghans are the refugees and internally displaced persons (IDP) who are slowly moving back to their houses and villages. Some of these fled other conflicts and severe drought, but tens of thousands (at least) abandoned their villages during the U.S. bombing campaign. Rabat Camp, a small community we visited about an hour outside of Kabul in the Shamali Valley, was typical. Given tents and some supplies, but no lasting support by the UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), they, like others, are now trying to eke out an existence in a geography riddled with landmines and unexploded ordinance.

The danger from landmines in Afghanistan is acute. The Hazardous Areas Life Support Organizations, HALO Trust, a humanitarian non-governmental organization

that is one of the premiere de-mining organizations in the world, works with 14 other de-mining operations in Afghanistan. Their work is coordinated through the UN Mine Action Center for Afghanistan (MACA). We visited their operations in the same Shamali Valley, where thousands of displaced and former refugee families are attempting to settle. They had 1,000 de-miners working at one site to try to make the area safe for returnees.

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Mines unearthed in Afghanistan tell their own gruesome story of war after war. From 1980 to 2002, each round of conflict left another layer of deadly debris. HALO Trust and others have one of the most difficult de-mining jobs in the world and it has been made significantly more difficult

through the use of cluster bombs by the U.S. in the war against Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

These diabolical weapons litter the ground with extremely hazardous bright yellow cylinders that are very attractive to children who have no toys. Each bomb carries 202 bomblets (called “bomb live units” or BLU). Of these, 10% or more fail to explode when the bomb is dropped. Cluster bombs are so hazardous to local communities that they have to be cleared immediately, completely shifting the priorities of all the de-mining organizations in Afghanistan and requiring retraining of thousands of de-miners.

While most agree that the U.S. identified targets carefully and did not intend civilian casualties, bombing populated areas, including Kabul, was unconscionable and exacerbated by the use of cluster bombs, clearly not “discriminate” weapons.

In fact, we listened very carefully to reactions in Afghanistan to the U.S. bombing campaign. Everyone we talked to expressed relief at the ouster of the Taliban, but we met too many people, including very young children, whose families and lives were devastated by the bombing, to describe the U.S. campaign as “just.” We met Amena, an 8 year old girl, who lost her mother,

all her brothers and sisters, and other relatives in a U.S. raid; Ehsanullah, a 7 year old boy from the Quargha neighborhood in Kabul, who told us how he and his cousin thought a cluster bomblet was a package of biscuits until it exploded causing severe injuries; and Orpha, a heartbroken woman who lost 8 members of her family to a U.S. bomb. Through the eyes of these people, even “discriminate” bombing seems morally unacceptable.

We were in Afghanistan during the *loya jerga*, an important traditional and quite infrequent assembly of representatives of the Afghani people. Its purpose was to continue the process begun in late 2001 in Bonn, Germany of establishing a durable government for the country.

Under the leadership of Hamid Karzai as head of state, Afghanistan is negotiating extremely tricky political waters in an effort to bring together all factions and all sectors of society. The warlords from different parts of the country whose unsavory reputations are widely acknowledged pose a particular challenge, especially in terms of security. Some are closely associated with the U.S. government, having provided ground troops and logistical support for the war on terror. After heated debate, and, some

say, pressure from the U.S., they were admitted to the *loya jerga*, where some were involved in intimidation of other delegates over such issues as the place of sharia law and Napoleonic law in Afghanistan and whether human rights violations would be brought to justice. In the end, several warlords were incorporated into the new Cabinet, including Mohammed Fahim as Minister of Defense and Abdullah Abdullah as Minister of Foreign affairs.

This, according to Tayeb Djawad, Karsai’s chief of staff, was an effort to neutralize their divisiveness, but problems began to surface within days. Difficulties were also created immediately by extremely conservative Muslims over the Ministry of Women’s Affairs. Despite objections to such a department and its controversial Minister, Sima Samar, who had become an outspoken advocate for women in Afghanistan, the new Cabinet does maintain this ministry.

The moment in Afghanistan is very fragile. The U.S. can place the war on terror above the needs and interests of the Afghani people—or recognize that terror will be better overcome with a stable Afghanistan that will contribute greatly to improved relations with the world of Islam.

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