

ABOVE OUR HEADS

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WITOLD KRASSOWSKI

witek@ekpictures.com.pl

+48 501 78 18 08

There are some opinions that Afghans repeat like mantras when questioned about their country. These opinions don't necessarily reflect the facts, but certainly represent the state of mind of the people. They thus become facts.

- We have lost initiative in our country. Americans imposed on us this government, that they control, they deal directly with the military and we don't have a say in the decisions that shape our lives. Everything is arranged above our heads. They haven't done anything for the people, they are worse than Russians. They just launch these campaigns with big poetic names like Big North Wind or Mountain Fury, and Taliban keep winning, they are on the outskirts of Kabul already. Obviously the Taliban could be removed in no time, America willing, but instead America prefers to play a game of hide and seek.

-We have lost our solidarity. Before the fighting we had our rich and poor, obviously, but the rich knew they had to take care of the poor, so the latter could rely on them in time of need. Now it's gone. Our commanders made profit from the fighting in the country. This is the money that gets invested in Afghanistan today, the money from fighting, not the money from business, and it's not invested in production, just housing. They don't know how much they have got and don't care if they lose it. So the feeling of insecurity is still there. The commanders enjoy their wealth and their former soldiers go begging. After the fighting the international aid increased inequalities even more. The charities offered absurd money for housing and services, thus creating another financial elite. In the same time by handing help directly to the needy they induced the poor into passivity and claiming attitude. They destroyed their moral and physical fitness. And what more, the huge money the charities spent on their lifestyle is presented in the books as international aid to Afghanistan but it all goes to few rich, foreign companies and Toyota.

- We must find a new system. Our former ways of administration don't work. The king's rule is no good, neither is the communists'. During the war with Soviets period we had commanders. Luckily they got almost dealt with by Taliban. Now the Americans revived them for the sake of their own politics, so we are set back. But we need to modernise our state and our administration. Otherwise the neighbours will always rule in our country. We are tired of war, we need peace and security to develop our economy. We want to modernise our lives, especially the young, who watch TV, and the refugees who returned from camps. They have suffered a lot and now they want to enjoy good life. They brought with them new ideas and new culture. Only people in remote villages are not happy, the changes are happening too quickly for them. The impact of the media on the young creates big tension in villages.

- There is no widespread drugs addiction in Afghanistan. The production is enormous, sure, but it's all for export. The peasants grow the plants, international mafia buys the harvest three years in advance, so the farmers can not stop planting drug crops. The production process, all the networking and logistics involved are organised and controlled by the central government in Kabul. Being in government is the biggest business of all. Karzai just makes the right noises for the international community, he has no power anyway. If the situation becomes too difficult all the people in government will disappear, they have American passports ready in their pockets, they don't care.

LIST OF AFGHANISTAN CURRENT PROBLEMS

- An ever-more deadly insurgency with sanctuaries in neighboring Pakistan, where leaders of al-Qaeda and the Taliban have found refuge;
- A corrupt and ineffective administration without resources and a potentially dysfunctional parliament;
- Levels of poverty, hunger, ill health, illiteracy, and gender inequality that put Afghanistan near the bottom of every global ranking;
- Levels of aid that have only recently expanded above a fraction of that accorded to other post-conflict countries;
- An economy and administration heavily influenced by drug traffickers;
- Massive arms stocks despite the demobilization of many militias;
- A potential denial of the Islamic legitimacy of the Afghan government by a clergy that feels marginalized;
- Ethnic tensions exacerbated by competition for resources and power;
- Interference by neighboring states, all of which oppose a long-term U.S. presence in the region;
- Well-trained and well-equipped security forces that the government may not be able to pay when aid declines in a few years;
- Constitutional requirements to hold more national elections (at least six per decade) than the government may be able to afford or conduct;
- An exchange rate inflated by aid and drug money that subsidizes cheap imports and hinders economic growth; and
- Future generations of unemployed, frustrated graduates and dropouts from the rapidly expanding school system.

Barnett R. Rubin

The Center for Preventive Action of The Council on Foreign Relations



Kid flying a kite in the settlement of the immigrants from the province that came to Kabul in search of jobs and security, Chawk area.



A local blacksmith heats up a sickle with the help of a boy (middle) pumping air into the furnace, in his workshop in the city of Borak, near Faizabad, Badakhshan province



A football match in an empty swimming pool on top of Bibi Mahru hill in Northern Kabul

A boy working in a
workshop off Ka Fa-
rushi birds bazaar in
Kabul





Boys clean carrots by spraying water on them and kicking to get the mud go in a wasteland behind Habibia High School. The number of land mines is still very high in Afghanistan and people with prosthesis are trying to make a living. Recently the UN cut funds necessary for demining by 60%, jeopardising the plan to clean Afghanistan by 2012.



Street vendors at the entrance to the Women's Garden, also known as Women's Paradise where women and children only are allowed. They can enjoy complete freedom behind the wall.



In Afghanistan, wherever there are kites, there is kite fighting. During the fight two kites are flown close to one another, often at great heights. The object is to use the wire of your kite to cut the wire of your opponent's kite and set it free. When a kite is cut free, it flutters into the far reaches of the city. Such kites are said to be "free and legal," and can be retrieved by children to fly another day. Each neighbourhood crowns its own kite-fighting champion. Kabul, Maranjan Hill.



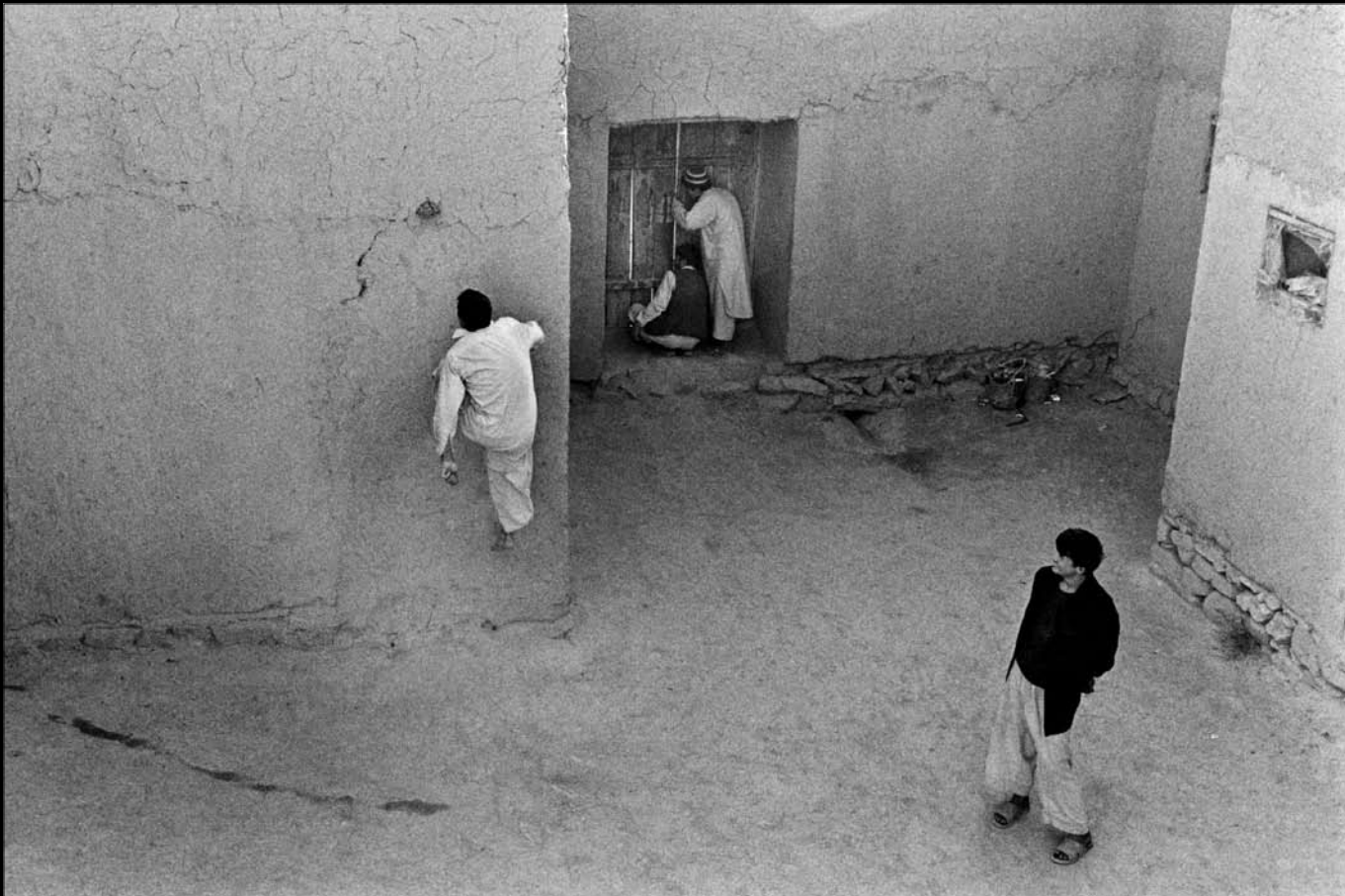
An abandoned soviet tank from the Afghan-Soviet war is used by a local handicapped one-legged man hired by the local community as a human scarecrow. Standing on the tank's turret he cracks a whip to scare small birds away from the rice field near the road from Kabul to Kunduz



A hunchbacked boy in a tea house (chaikhana) in Kalafgan, on the main road to Faizabad



Jobless builders gather every morning at sunrise at the Saraj Shamoli roundabout in Kabul, where they are offered jobs by private small investors. Kabul looks like a booming city and small scale construction and renovation works are going on everywhere but employment opportunities for unskilled labour in this sector are scarce, highly seasonal and subject to huge competition. The country has 40% unemployment rate, with jobs in the province non existent.



The inmates in a provincial prison in Argo region, near Faizabad, Badakshan exercise daily by organising a contest to knock down a woollen hat using feet only. The hat is first hanged on a nail in the prison wall, some 3 metres high and all the inmates try their luck and technique in turn. Two men in the back are peeping outside, possibly to see if they can spot their relatives with food.

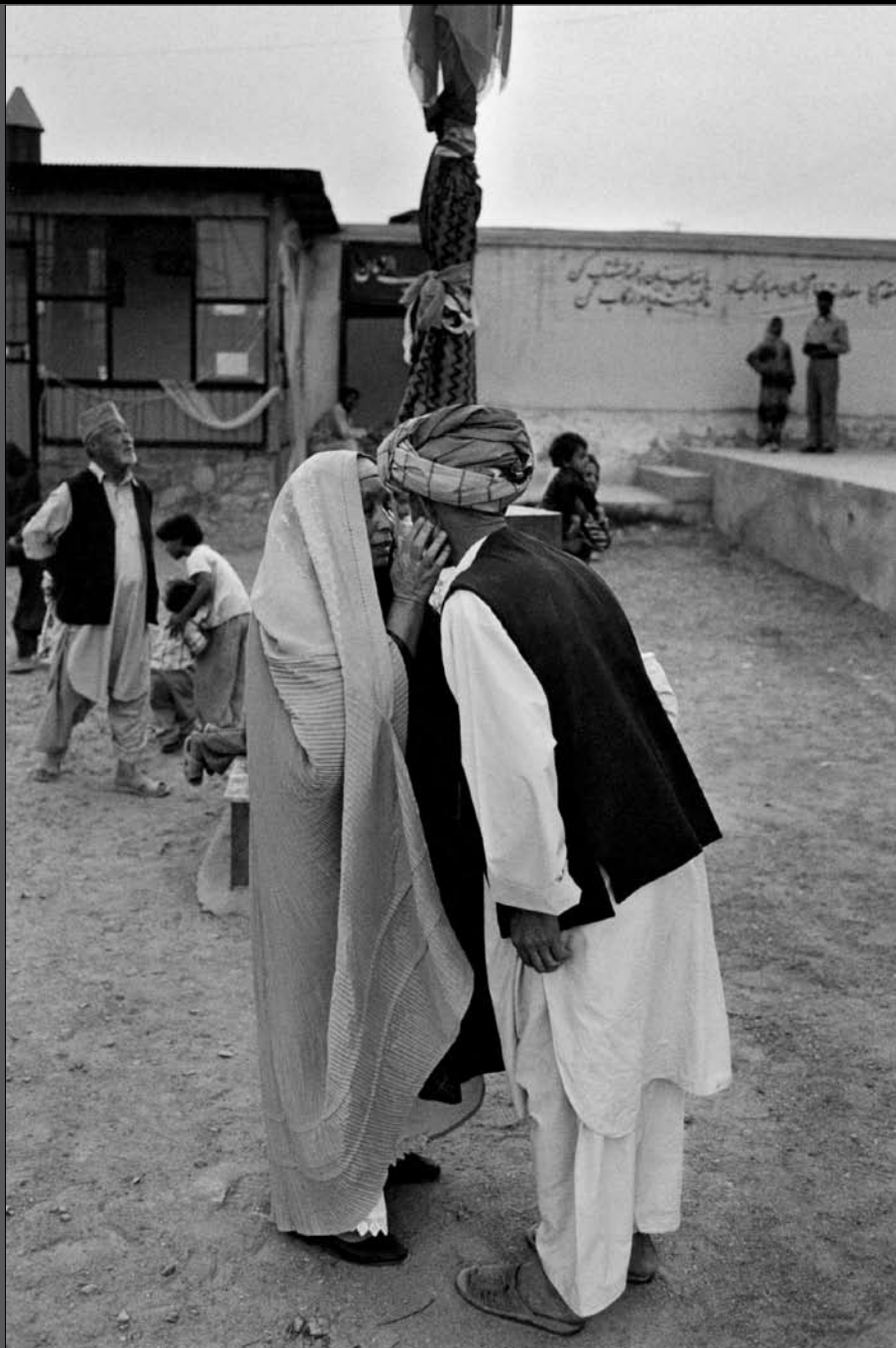


An charming scene with the loom and weaver in a private carpet factory in Deh Dana
Southern part of Kabul



An open air slaughterhouse in the sheep market in Faizabad, Badakshan province

A woman kisses a man
on a cheek in front of
a holy pole wrapped
in green and golden
fabric, in the com-
pound of Sahid Ismail
Balhi mosque





A handicapped man walks with his wife in a crowded street in Kabul market



A swing in the Kabul Zoological garden, favourite spot for Friday entertainment, as the city has very little to offer in this respect



An old muezzin waits for evening prayers in the village of Spin Gaw, near Faizabad, Badakshan



A tramp lies in the street while two boys indulge in kite flying, their favourite pastime.



Two men sit in front of the settlement of immigrants from the province that came to Kabul in search of jobs and security, Chawk area