

Quaker Engagement with Afghan Refugees

by Rowe Morrow, Blue Mountains Local Meeting (NSWRM)

I'd been in Afghanistan about the time the US army arrived in 2002 and I stayed in Mahboba's Promise orphanage with 60 children. It was hard times as the country started to think about freedom from the Taliban, and how to rebuild. Gary Caganoff made the film at that time "Garden at the End of the World". I kept contact with people I met and developed a deep interest in the country. In 2015 Martin Reusch, a friend and now a member of Blue Mountains Local Meeting (NSWRM) suggested that permaculture would be valuable for a group of young peace activists doing exciting peace work in the country. It was a wonderful opportunity. Martin was visiting regularly. Dale Hess (VRM) was paying the rent of a community house for peace projects.

I taught two permaculture design courses over the next years and kept contact with the progress of the project. We were working towards starting the first permaculture local NGO in Afghanistan and also recommending some students as consultants to other NGOs in the country. Some graduates worked with the University and some in rural areas helping women with improved techniques for growing food. Others were advisers to a Kabul primary school so they could introduce permaculture into their syllabus. These courses were funded by Australian Quakers and a small grant from LUSH, UK.

However, life was not really improving for many in Kabul. The Taliban and other groups consistently destroyed the power supplies. Last year there was a drought from lack of snow for snow-melt irrigation. The water table in Kabul was dropping very fast. Permaculture had some answers but not all. The Afghan Government reluctantly tolerated the peace and social welfare activities of our young friends. In 2021 the Taliban invaded Kabul. The return of the Taliban to government meant that the lives of our young friends were now in danger. Members of their family were killed or injured. They desperately needed a place of safety to live. Several of us, peace and permaculture activists - essentially a small group from Australia, Portugal, the USA, UK and Canada came together over Zoom to see what we could do. Some people were in immediate danger and left the country, usually illegally, to go to Pakistan. Others, fearful of persecution, moved their residence almost daily.

The Canadian Government has a sponsorship program and we are hoping to have some people accepted on that. We also hope it will be accepted as a model for Australia. Canadian Friends have been involved in negotiations. Although the Australian Government offered 3,000 humanitarian visas to Afghans after the fall of the Kabul Government, this so far has been an empty promise. No visas have been issued.

Australian Friends, however, immediately donated money privately and the Nancy Shelley Fund gave AUD 10,000. This has been invaluable in having ready funds for emergencies. These funds have been used for food, medicines, visas, fares and so on. Getting money into the country hasn't been an easy task. Many of our small international group worked on getting immigration forms correctly filled in to reduce the chance of their being rejected. Others are

giving personal support to our friends who are anxious about an uncertain future. Mark Isaacs, the writer, joined us and donated royalties from his book, 'A Peace House in Kabul'.

Eunice Neves, who was working on permaculture projects in Australia and who had supported permaculturists in Kabul, had to leave Australia because her visa expired. Eunice picked up the issues in Portugal immediately after the Taliban arrived in Kabul. From then on, she worked ceaselessly to see what Portugal could offer. She found a land restoration project in southern Portugal. With the loss of people from rural land, they lacked experienced people. The project offered a 12- month training program. Eunice convinced the Departments of Immigration and Foreign Affairs to support some permaculture refugees from Afghanistan for this project. We were asked to

provide financial support for the refugees for a year. Eunice then developed a detailed budget for the expenses for the year, based on other organisations who had similar projects.

We, Friends, in Australia, asked the AYM Thanksgiving Fund for money to support the Portuguese Project. Within about five days the Thanksgiving Fund had granted us the money to support the arrival of the young Afghans in Portugal and their first year. The Portuguese Government helped negotiate with the Taliban for our friends to obtain visas to Pakistan. Travel arrangements to Pakistan, temporary accommodation, medical examinations, and all of the other arrangements fell into place. It was truly marvellous. The Portuguese Government, after a close examination, supported a group of eight people with visas and invitations to Portugal. The Portuguese Ambassador in Pakistan farewelled them at the airport at 3.00 am.

On 3 March, eight young Afghan people arrived in Lisbon. They were taken to the village, Mértola, where they will stay. The local government welcomed them, the local Mayor welcomed them, the baby is welcome at the childcare centre, their home was furnished and the door open. It is a village which has a Muslim festival each year. Some of us met with them on zoom recently and they all wanted to say how grateful they were to be SAFE. The Agro-ecology project will provide a year's training as it is an environmental restoration project. Their permaculture training will be valuable.

We continue to work for others. Three now are in Germany, a family of four is in Canada, others may get university scholarships. The Global Ecovillage Network is interested in this model and in welcoming refugees. The model is also being used for Ukrainian permaculturists to partner them with Europeans.

And for our 'small group of international people' well, we continue to work for our friends in Afghanistan who are in real danger of their lives - some need to leave. We are also assisting people under threat and in distress in Kabul. Food and fuel are in short supply. The Nancy Shelley Bequest funds are to be used for this purpose. It is invaluable to have discretionary funds for unpredictable situations and purposes.



Image: Afghan refugees arriving in Portugal airport.

We can account for how we use the money but we cannot predict exactly what the needs will be. Thank you, Friends, for your continued financial support and prayers. by Rowe Morrow, Blue Mountains Local Meeting (NSWRM)

Source: Quakers Australia Secretary's Newsletter - March 2023,
<https://www.quakersaustralia.info/sites/aym-members/files/pages/files/SNL3.22.pdf>
viewed: 4 May 2022