



The September 11, 2001 Attacks

Flora MacDonald

Supply corridors essential to prevent 1.5 to 3 million deaths in Afghanistan

Former External Affairs Minister Flora MacDonald says her main message on Afghanistan to non-governmental organizations and governments is that "the prospect that 3 million people may die is not something that the world can contemplate".

The redoubtable Ms. MacDonald, who has made herself familiar with the top of Asia over many years of hiking and trekking, spoke on the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan at the G78's first speaker's lunch of the 2001-02 season at the end of October. She visited Afghanistan on behalf of CARE Canada, for which she is a program adviser, in March and is in daily e-mail contact with sources on the Afghanistan border with Pakistan.

Her sources tell her that between 1.5 and 3 million people in Afghanistan risk starving to death this winter. To enable them to receive supplies, she says, safety corridors must be negotiated backed up by United Nations assurances that the routes and convoys will be protected.

A slightly abridged version of Ms. MacDonald's talk follows.

An uncle patrolled near the Khyber Pass

Since childhood I have had a great interest in the countries of the Far East, particularly those in high altitude areas. Three years ago I organized a trekking and tenting trip for six women friends from Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, 1,500 miles west to Kashgar in the far west of China, bordering on Tajikistan, then south down the Karakoram Highway to Peshawar and Islamabad in Pakistan. That trip - an unforgettable experience - took us seven weeks.

My interest in that part of the world was first stirred by reading letters from my father's oldest brother, Alex MacDonald, who had left the pursuit of law studies at Dalhousie University to enlist, at the age of 17 years, with the Imperial Black Watch Regiment, to join the forces fighting in the Boer War in South Africa. At the end of that campaign, instead of returning home, he decided to remain with his regiment and their next posting was to the North-West Frontier Province of what was then India. The following is an

extract from a letter he wrote to his father on March 29, 1905 (and which indicated that it had taken two months for his father's letter to reach him):

Peshawar, where we are now stationed, is the frontier of India. The neutral ground dividing us from Afghanistan is right in front of our bungalow. It is a station where you have to keep your eyes open both day and night, especially night, as the surrounding country is infested with moving bands of robbers, all well armed, who are continually trying to surprise you and capture your rifles, the one thing precious above all others to a Pathan (Pashtun) or Afghan. They are a very powerful native group, and not to be compared to the down-country wretches who are famine and plague stricken. The Pathan (Pashtun) is a fighter and nothing else.

We are only two miles from the Khyber Pass where the Russians say they will come some day. The Gordons and the Black Watch are the only two European regiments here. We are the first and they (the Gordons) the second Regiment in India for efficiency and hence for service as soon as anything happens. We have been three months in manoeuvres along the North-West Frontier.

In Afghanistan almost 100 years later

When I visited the Khyber Pass on our 1998 trek, I managed to convince the authorities to allow us to travel through the Pass. It was not until March this year that I was able to get back into Afghanistan on behalf of CARE Canada, which has had a large humanitarian program in that country for a number of years. I had intended to drive up the historic Pass again. But the day before I was due to leave Peshawar, a Red Cross vehicle was intercepted just outside Jalalabad and its two occupants held for questioning for some claimed infraction of regulations. The Canadian High Commission in Islamabad didn't want to risk wasting precious resources on having to extricate a former foreign minister from some similar mishap. So I flew in a UN aircraft to the airport on the outskirts of Kabul, a flight of breathtaking scenery on a bright sunny day, the valleys just emerging from winter, surrounded on all side by the long ranges of snow-capped mountains.

I was minister of external affairs at the time the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and I remember how carefully I studied maps of the wartorn region. As a result of the 20 years of conflict that followed, much of the major cities of Afghanistan was destroyed. Some 2 million people died, there was an exodus of 6 million refugees (The refugee camps in Iran are among the best), and the internal displacement of a million more. The infrastructure - in education, health, transportation, housing, in fact all programs - was destroyed.

The first thing that strikes you on the short drive into Kabul from the airport is the tremendous destruction all around you: houses, businesses, mosques, the former palace - buildings of all kinds have been flattened. Before the current bombardment, 50 per cent of Kabul had already been destroyed. I keep wondering how much more there is to bomb. But into those ruins thousands, probably hundreds of thousands, of Afghans from the

rural areas have fled, suffering not just from 20 years of conflict but also from three years of the most devastating drought in the country's history. Nothing has been able to grow except where irrigation systems have been installed.

Water, food, education for girls

When I was there, CARE Canada/CARE Afghanistan were employing almost 400 local Afghans, 80 of whom were women, in Kabul and the counties around Kabul. The organization had constructed a huge water distribution project in Kabul, which I understand is still working. It delivers water to 39,200 households in the capital and supplies some of the most congested refugee areas.

Among the other projects that CARE has been operating, one of the most inspiring and important involved food distribution to 10,000 widows and their 50,000 children. In addition to food distribution of wheat flour, cooking oil, and lentils sufficient for a month, the project had 50 women instructors (mostly former professionals) to give the young widows instruction in health and hygiene and to help them and their children grow kitchen gardens. Women are allowed to do this work because men are not allowed to become involved in any kind of health and hygiene programs for women.

The average age of the widows is 35, which gives you an idea of what the death toll has meant to Afghanistan. The regulations to enter the food distribution program require that the women must have three children under the age of 16; after that they have to leave the project as children over 16 are supposed to be able to get jobs and support their families. When you went into the food compounds, you saw hundreds of other women waiting outside, hoping to be admitted to the program.

Another project involved home schooling for 6,000 girls. Although the Taliban forbade girls from going to public schools, they often looked the other way for classes in private homes where the teachers are women who formerly taught in the public system. I found the children so eager to learn, so vivacious. They proved to also be in command of the right answers that would ward off reproach: when I asked one girl to tell me her favorite subject, she answered solemnly, "The study of the Holy Koran."

Another of the CARE projects, most of which are jointly funded by CIDA and the Canada Fund in Islamabad, is for irrigation and wells throughout the countryside. Through years of devastating drought CARE has supervised the digging or improving of 2,000 household wells and has involved communities in improvement to traditional irrigation systems and in the excavation of hundreds of new underground water resources.

Of all things, water is the greatest need. With adequate water supplies, villagers are able to grow wheat and other crops, and the production of these foodstuffs keeps them from flooding into the crowded cities in search of food. As you drive through the countryside,

one of the most notable features is the proliferation of small cemeteries - another legacy of the war years.

During my time in Kabul I met with two deputy ministers of the Taliban government and they were a striking contrast in attitudes. The younger one, the deputy minister of education, was open and friendly. He talked about the founding by the Japanese of a hospital for women and the training of women doctors. He was anxious to see these things move forward, and also to see improvements in schooling. The deputy minister of foreign affairs, on the other hand, was very pugnacious toward the people and countries of the West and unburdened himself of a whole list of grievances.

One of my friends is Dan Terry, head of the largest aid effort in Afghanistan, the International Assistance Mission, which provides food and shelter to the Hazaras (Shia Moslems) in the Hazarat region west of Bamiyan. He and his wife have been in Afghanistan since 1971, but not long ago were given 72 hours to leave the country. Unable to hand over their operation within the stipulated time, he had to call on smuggler friends to take them over smugglers' routes into Pakistan. A local chief, apologizing to them for their expulsion, promised to look after their property while they were gone. For a while he protected it from looters, but then he let his own people loot it.

The local chiefs manage to work with whoever comes along. In the West we need a better understanding of the complexity of Afghan society. In some ways it reminds me of the warring Highland clans of Scotland 300 years ago.

Food convoys must get through

Today, the United Nations estimates that a total of 7.5 million Afghans are at risk and in need of humanitarian assistance. Of this total, various sources estimate the number of Afghans in acute need and potentially at risk of starvation this winter is between 1.5 and 3 million people. You have seen the warehouses of the International Red Cross destroyed by bombing; as well, local workers have been very much harassed.

Jam and peanut butter are not really what the people are interested in. Fifty thousand metric tons of food per month are needed. Delivery by road is essential. Key routes connecting to major supplies of relief goods, whether from Pakistan, Iran or the North, could be identified, as could major pockets of need. The United Nations, or some other appropriate civilian agency, could then seek to negotiate safe passage for relief convoys along these routes with all local and international military entities whose operations might pose a risk - intentional or inadvertent - to humanitarian operations.

In the event that adequate security guarantees could not be obtained through negotiations with all parties, some sort of international military protection of the designated corridors or actual convoys, could be sought. Some routes that must be used are smugglers' routes.

We have had experience of such operations in Sudan and Somalia, where safe corridors were arranged. Now we need an approach to humanitarian corridors that makes sense in

Afghanistan.

The urgency of the situation comes across to me as I am in touch by e-mail with NGOs in Peshawar every night to be brought up to date. It is quite a change in communications from the days when my Uncle Alex was there.

Footnote: Ms. MacDonald's Uncle Alex became regimental sergeant-major and then a commissioned officer in the 2nd Battalion, The Black Watch. He lost his life at the age of 42 in the Mesopotamia campaign during the First Great War.

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

Asked whether it would be possible to negotiate with the Taliban on humanitarian routes, Ms. MacDonald said, "You have to take the chance." The Americans, too, would have to be approached to at least keep the corridors free from bombing.

Asked whether she was implying that the air drops of food were merely a propaganda device, Ms. MacDonald said, "Yes." She said she had never heard before of dropping bombs and food at the same time. "It is presumably done to take away some of the animosity growing from civilian casualties."

Ms. MacDonald said, "I thoroughly agree that the current government has to be ousted." The effort to rebuild Afghanistan would have to begin at the village level. Asked about postwar structure in Afghanistan, Ms. MacDonald recalled the experience of projects with which she has been connected that have created locally-run health services in 250 villages of western Tibet. These projects had led to creation of other locally managed services and businesses. The same type of community-building had been successful in India; it could work in Afghanistan.