

Afghanistan March 2003

Afghanistan is the most challenging country on earth to visit let alone seek to preach the Truth in. Ravaged by 35 years of some of the world's bitterest fighting, millions have been killed, wounded and driven into refugee camps over neighbouring borders. The remaining population is down to 75% women and 25% men. Kabul is literally a city of ruins; village after village lies in ruins, literally every house fought over and the remaining inhabitants living in tents.



Kabul in ruins



Ruined villages



and their inhabitants in tents

In addition, there is the damage done by the years of Taliban control. Women were denied education and any resistance to the strictest forms of Islam was punished by torture and death; we heard countless stories of such brutality- feet cut off for having nail varnish on, etc. etc. The new Government has no effective power outside of Kabul; Taliban, al Qaeda and local warlords control the rest of the country. Anarchy operates here as perhaps nowhere else; and life remains cheap, with death on every corner. If you want something, you take it from someone who has it. The social and economic hierarchy depends on how much firepower you have. Many women continue to wear the full body burqas, with their faces totally covered. The only income into the economy is from Western aid organizations, and these only cover the Kabul area.



Aid organizations

The rest of the country is in a totally desperate state, the tragedy of which is now eclipsed by the Iraq crisis. In some areas there 64% of women die during child birth.



Mortality rates

Telephone lines are virtually non-existent, the roads largely impassible. Banditry and extortion by the local warlords is endemic. Almost everyone is armed, and any who can afford it travel with armed bodyguards.

We flew from Turkey via Tehran, Iran, arriving at Bagram military airstrip in Kabul to find the field still littered with destroyed aircraft just pulled to one side of the runway.



Checking in



Ruined planes

We were informed on arrival that Westerners have to rent full-time bodyguards, who make a contract with the Government accepting responsibility for us. They have to inform the Government of our movements outside of Kabul and accompany us, radioing ahead to the military check points along the way to prepare them for our coming. They also have to take responsibility legally in the case of our murder, which is pretty common for Westerners who travel outside Kabul.



Bodyguards

So we drove off with our guards, who turned into good buddies with us over the course of a week, although we could hardly tell them our exact aims. The only recommended safe hotel is the Intercontinental, although a few days before our arrival 2 Westerners had been shot there. We got there to find it packed out. We soon discovered that the price of hotels and guest houses simply depends on how well guarded they are.



Security

Eventually we ended up staying at the relatives of our guards. They were real decent people, genuinely committed to developing Afghanistan through Western support. Our driver quietly told us how he had knocked out a Talibaner who tried to kill an Italian journalist who was under his protection. Of course we had to pay the earth for this, partly to the Government and partly to him. The price of everything here is simply very high.

We came here with three specific aims:

1. To help Bro. K. escape from neighbouring Pakistan. His photograph has been published in two Pakistani newspapers and there is a call for his death because of preaching. We saw the newspapers and have scans of the articles and photos. His name and mobile phone number were announced over the Mosque loudspeakers and he was dragged from a car and beaten. His phone number has been published in the newspapers. His family are threatened and in hiding- he has a sister wife and two children. He fled to another city and lived in various hotels for a while and our aim was to get him out of Pakistan to Afghanistan, and from thence to flee the area.
2. To meet contacts requesting baptism in Jalalabad and the largely Taliban controlled city of Kandahar.
3. To seek to further preach the Gospel here.

Rescuing Bro. K.

Thanks to your generosity, we had been able to provide for K. to flee and be in hiding in northern Pakistan, but his life was increasingly at risk from the Moslem fanatics. The border area between Pakistan and Afghanistan is totally lawless, and is currently believed to be where Osama bin Laden is hiding. To pass through this mountainous area is difficult indeed. Any white person is assumed to be a Western special forces agent. The only income is from banditry, where the victims are normally murdered. There are no tarmaced roads, only tracks through the mountains which are drivable only in large vehicles. To cut a long story short, it was by God's grace alone that we got K. out and into Afghanistan to the relative but temporary safety of Kabul.

Photo 10,11 Bro. K with us in the mountain passes; handing over welfare cash in Kabul [photos now removed for security reasons]

K is just an amazing brother. In our week together it was a wonderful experience to unite with him and together in the daily Bible readings, sustained prayer, and especially discussion of our essential mission in this world. I think almost every other brother would have decided he had risked enough in the preaching of the Gospel, but K is determined to go on, and was enthusiastic to help us in the work in Afghanistan. K. knows some of the Afghani languages and was a great inspiration to us to keep going. Any who convert from Islam are to be killed within 3 days; and any who seek to convert them are likewise to be murdered. Even the Western run aid

agencies say that despite their Christian principles they are scared to baptize anyone. Youth With A Mission's director told us that they had baptized nobody in their 12 months of operating here. But K. spurred us on to reach our contacts at all costs and to do all we could to advertise and distribute our Farsi Bible Basics and Bibles yet further.

Photo 12: An Iranian brother producing a Farsi / Dari Bible Companion by hand in Turkey. We took 10 xeroxed copies with us and our new brethren in Afghanistan undertook to use them daily.



We are sending funds to K's wife and family so that they can survive in Pakistan, and bought K. a plane ticket to Turkey where we plan to get a 'safe house' for him to remain for the next couple of months. He will be able to meet with the Iranians also holed up there, but will be totally dependent upon our support. The ACBM have declined to give any support for him and so he is totally dependent upon what we raise for him. With the newspaper articles, we believe K. has a good chance of getting assylum, but the amazing thing is his sense of duty towards the people of Pakistan and those already baptized there. He doesn't want to leave the region because of the work- even with us encouraging him to go for assylum in Australia. This is the kind of commitment to the Gospel that is so inspirational. He turned down the easier way for the sake of taking the message to others. It reminds us of Paul who seems to have turned down an offer from the Lord to exit this life on the reasoning that "to abide in the flesh is more needful for you". So many such New Testament passages took on a powerful reality as we read and discussed them together.

Baptisms

One is taking their life in their hand just being in Afghanistan To seek to preach and baptize even moreso. For a white man to be seen in a river with a local will immediately lead to major problems and likely death. For contacts to be seen with a suspected missionary likewise leads to their execution. We went to see our contacts in Jalalabad. We'll probably all long remember the night before as we sat in our room debating if we should all go or just one. Reports were pretty scary from the Westerners and others we had met. Most Westerners got attacked on the way and recently an Italian woman had been raped and murdered there. I suggested I alone would go. Liz and John without any hesitation insisted to come too. There was a kind of military bonding between us- we all were in this together, committed to the same goals. So after a lot of prayer we left at sunrise- our guards wouldn't agree to any travel in darkness. Our guard urged us to pay for another guard vehicle to come with us, packed with armed guards. This would've cost another \$600. And as Bro K. reminded us, the guards would unlikely fight for us anyway if it came to it. Not just because of cost but because we didn't want to attract attention to ourselves and also because like Nehemiah returning to Zion we preferred to not take the King's support as it were but trust in Angelic protection. So with Fawad armed only with his revolver we made the supposedly 4 hour trip to Jalalabad- which ended up taking 6.5 hours.

The road from Kabul to Jalalabad is just surreal. There has been more fighting over these 150 km. in the last 30 years than probably anywhere else on the planet. The road is in ruins, running through some of the planet's most spectacular scenery.

Photo 13,14, 14a The Kabul-Jalalabad road; abandoned tanks;



The deep gorges of the Hindu Kush mountains are ideal for ambushes. Abandoned tanks and half tracks lay scattered along the roadside. Without exception every village along the road lies in total ruins. People live with their animals in UNHCR tents. The check points are operated by the local warlords who make a completely arbitrary judgment as to whether to just wave you through, shoot you, rob you or rape you. There are men with guns, official and unofficial, wandering around all over the place.

Photo 14 b, 14 c: Men with guns are everywhere



The guide books all warn never to leave the roadside because of the mines. Mines are a major problem in Afghanistan. There are a huge number of legless men on the streets. We had a somewhat amusing situation when Liz was busting for the loo. The guard really wouldn't let us stop until we reached a tea house some way down the road. There are two flags in Afghanistan - little green ones over makeshift graves, and red ones placed by the demining commission to mark mines. And of course the majority of Afghanistan is untouched by their work. There are some spectacular minefields covered with a mixture of green and red flags.



Photo 15, 16 Makeshift roadside grave; demining operations;

We had a total of 4 punctures on the way. Each time we prayed earnestly. It's no fun being alone in those gorges with no spare wheel.



Photo 17,18 Punctures

One was especially scary. We had no spare- it had punctured some way back- and the tyre split. We needed a tyre. Our guard / driver took the punctured one and hiked a ride on an army jeep, leaving us there by the road with the car. Three men came up and stood by us- seems they were Angels.



Photo 19, 20 Abandoned with our Angels

They then disappeared and another three Taliban-looking guys came up. One pulled out a sharpened sickle and they just hung around, like they were weighing up whether to attack or not. They then finally walked off. And then our guard returned, hanging on the back of a truck with the repaired wheel inside. And off we drove. We finally reached Jalalabad, where we bought new tyres and inner tubes. There are just too many guns in Afghanistan; it's almost expected that you carry one.



Photo 21,22: Too many guns

We saw only one other foreigner in Jalalabad, flanked by alert bodyguards armed to the teeth. We found that our contacts had not got news of our arrival and were over the border in Peshawar. Bro. K. had previously visited them along with Bro. F. from Pakistan. It was a great disappointment. We sat in a hotel- who charged us \$20 just for the privilege of sitting there an hour- dined with a bunch of bin Laden look a likes, and then made our way back to Kabul. There are no telephones much in Afghanistan, the postal service is virtually non existent, so you really need to spend a long time there to achieve anything.

Our other contacts are down in the Taliban / Al-Qaeda stronghold of Kandahar. Islamic fundamentalism is at its worst there. Any Westerner is likely to be shot or tortured, all the more so if they got wind that we were seeking to convert Moslems away from Islam. It's a 12-15 hour journey down there from Kabul. Our guard / driver was very nervous about attempting it and really wanted us to hire another vehicle with guards before attempting it; he alone wanted \$600 for the trip. And we had no idea how many tires we would have to buy- the Afghan roads are really so bad. Debris as well as jagged stones litter them. The majority of them have no tarmac left on them. These were in the days leading up to the US / British declaration of war on Iraq. Tensions were very high and most aid workers were being evacuated from Kabul, let alone

Kandahar. We learnt that the last Aid agencies were pulling their workers out the day we planned on going down there. The Taliban had issued a communique stating that they had 10,000 assassins ready to liquidate every Westerner in Afghanistan if the US declared war. We went to the UN and asked if we could get a ride on their daily flight down there- which they were still managing then, even though shelling had reduced the runway to only 500 metres. They refused as we weren't working for any embassy. So we were left with driving down. We really prayed about it and eventually decided that I would go down there alone. We were watching the BBC World news and everyone was very tense about the Islamic threats if war broke out. Our bodyguard didn't want to allow us to split up as he had a responsibility for us all and had to stay with us all. Bro K then insisted that he would go down there alone, as our bodyguard seemed to be getting suspicious about what we were doing, and he felt he could make trouble if he saw us baptizing people. Especially in Kandahar, this would lead to certain death. We then heard that as all whites were fleeing Kandahar for Kabul, the taxi drivers were charging over \$1000 for the trip, and could easily get half way and then demand more. If K and I had gone alone, we'd have had to use these public service taxis. So K. insisted on going down alone whilst we got a message to the folks in Jalalabad to come in to Kabul and meet us there. With much prayer we let K. go alone- he dressed up in the Moslem traditionalist dress, the *shalwar kameez*; he said even to wear jeans was enough to attract fundamentalist attention. He and Bro. F. had already made a trip down there before to see these contacts.

The ultimate result of all this was that K returned from Kandahar to us in Kabul glad to be alive, with the news that we could very likely have been killed had we accompanied him. All UN and aid agency workers had left and the city was totally in the hands of the fundamentalists. Even the US peace keeping troops are now not making patrols any more after major riots just before K arrived. The city is now totally out of Central Government or US / ISAF peacekeeping force control. With all the focus on Iraq the crisis in Afghanistan has gotten somewhat forgotten. Anyway the bottom line was that three contacts were baptized: FARIS [20 years old and married]; ABDUL [age 22] and IMRAN [age 25]. The latter are both single. They are very keen to witness to the Truth and are apparently totally prepared for the persecution which will follow. Bro. K reports that there is a whole group of ex-Moslems in Kandahar who are extremely interested in the Truth! This is just amazing- that in the very heart of the only city on earth effectively under the control of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, there are people interested in the Truth, and now a small ecclesia! Postal contact with them seems hopeless- out of our last 3 letters informing them of our coming, only one had gotten through. Our brethren had been working for a foreign N.G.O. [non Governmental Organization] who had just pulled out of Kandahar because of the impossibility and danger of working there, giving them 2 months wages and that's it. So they need our prayers. Bro. K. assured us that he had interviewed them extensively and got their agreement to use the Farsi version of the *Bible Companion* which he presented them with. He baptized them and then broke bread with them and pronounced them the first ecclesia in Afghanistan.

We simply praise the Father for His blessing. Things seem so impossible here. Yet He has His plan and will guide us to the end in His work. Simply getting there is hard enough- it's hard to buy tickets, the flight was delayed by a day, and once you are in Afghanistan it seems impossible to find out about the return flight. The airline has no computers and names are just written down on a list. You can't find out the day nor the hour of the departure, no matter what your ticket says, until about 15-24 hours before takeoff. Planning is simply so hard. These baptisms

could *only* have been achieved by God's will and grace.

Preaching The Gospel In Afghanistan

Spreading the Gospel here is going to be pretty hard; and yet so many, many Moslems here realize that the way of Christ is far superior to that of Islam. And we have the major advantage of preaching a human Jesus, one God etc., which avoids presenting them with the stumblingblock of the trinity. But it will be hard to do it in any traditional way. At present we can continue with distributing our Farsi / Dari stocks of *Bible Basics* , and we hope for enough funds to publish the book in Pashto- the other major language of Afghanistan. We have the translation now and need to print it. The sheer human need in Afghanistan is incredible. If as a community we were willing to put more human and financial resources into this area, it would be easy to get a foothold through opening an aid project, e.g. teaching English, in Kabul. There is another way forward, through tapping in to the huge sense there is that women have been so badly treated that there need to be special initiatives aimed at women. We went to the media centre and sought to place simple adverts in the journals that have been started especially for women. The French staff were pretty nervous of us- one of their workers had just been murdered for placing an advertisement by a Christian aid group. We tried to place an advert simply inviting Afghani women to correspond with women in the West in order to improve their English. The majority of women in Afghanistan- and they are 75% of the war-scarred population- have had little or no education and don't know English, and are barely literate even in their native languages. In addition, the postal service is so poor that communication would be difficult. There are only two internet access points in Afghanistan, both intended for the use of journalists only. There are no ISPs as such in Afghanistan, the connections are made by satellite phone to Pakistani servers.



Photo: Newly launched women's magazines and women's initiatives

Without doubt a further visit has to be attempted here. Bro. F would find it hard to come again as he nearly lost his life in Afghanistan on his previous trip because he is Punjabi. Bro. K is going to be in exile in Turkey for some time. So we would really need to make a trip again ourselves, perhaps once this present Iraq crisis is somewhat over, when travelling may again be a bit safer than it presently is. Any willing to join us, please get in touch. Please also be aware that the work in Afghanistan falls outside the care of any of the CBMs and we are having to finance this from other sources.

Above all, we do urgently appeal for your prayers for the work here and for the brethren involved, for the Kandahar ecclesia especially, and especially for Bro. K as he flees to Turkey. We are really and truly grateful for your prayers for us on this trip especially; the power of them we almost physically felt at times. It goes without saying that there are major financial issues involved especially in caring for Bro K and his family. From our hearts- thank you. To God alone be the glory. We believe that the Lord opened up Afghanistan like He opened up Eastern Europe- for us to come in and witness in. We are merely scratching the surface but clearly He is with us. We

think of our one contact in Baghdad, Iraq- and it seems the Lord may be working to open up Iraq simply so that we can go in there with the Gospel.

Duncan [with Liz & John]