



Helmand Province in southern Afghanistan has become a focal point of conflict resolution for parallel governments on the one hand, and for parallel solutions to their problems on the other. One government is led by a President who is as well educated as any Head of State in the world and who is guided by an abundance of personal international experience. The other “government,” under the influence of military personnel who are far from uniformly literate, is challenged to lead a civilian population that is eager to erase illiteracy and the poverty that accompanies it. The short-term solution is military action, with the goal of driving out the Taliban or, from their point of view, of taking over the government. The long-term solution is education, with the goal of including and absorbing the Taliban or, from their point of view, of participating in the governance and economy of Afghanistan as equal partners. Dr. Mohammad Khan Kharoti returned this fall to the scene of this double conflict and worked for four months in Shin Kalay with villagers who are focused more on schools and economic opportunity than on governance.

School construction continues

Mohammad directed the expensive transport of construction materials through an active conflict zone, and supervised the completion of 28 new classrooms, all the while communicating openly with the Afghan Ministry of Education at the local and national level and with the Taliban’s Director of Education at the local level. The woodworking for window/door frames was all done on site with high quality wood. The fine sand for the plastering was transported a considerable distance, from the Arghandab River upstream from Lasjkar Gah. Our school now has 58 classrooms and an enrollment of over 3,000 students, more than 1,800 from Shin Kalay, the others transferred from three district schools that were closed. The government brought the teachers, janitors, and supplies from those schools to Shin Kalay.



Second floor classrooms’ wall construction



Doors and windows installation for second floor classrooms

The challenge to educate girls

Earlier this year, the Taliban would not allow girls to attend our school until female teachers are available. Mohammad met with their District Education Director and convinced him that there cannot be female teachers unless girls go to school. The Taliban eventually agreed to allow girls to return up to sixth grade, under the conditions that older trusted men teach them; no other men or boys are allowed on their side of the well-divided (by gender) school; and if any problems occur for the girls, they are immediately reported to their District Director of Education before word reaches their military. Their underlying concerns are the safety and reputations of the girls, and avoidance of punishment themselves for allowing girls in the school, should any of them be hassled or abused. Mohammad immediately hired an older man who had taught for years in Shin Kalay until the Taliban took over two years ago. The Afghan government followed this lead with the hiring of three more trusted older men for teaching girls.

Working with both sides of the conflict

There is a consistent fine line Mohammad must walk to achieve the education goals that both the Afghan government and the Taliban really want. Caroline Richards, with the Afghan Appeal Fund in London, had asked Mohammad if it would be possible to secure a plot of land for a sports field for students in Shin Kalay. As required, he got a letter of request from the Afghan government’s School Director in Shin Kalay, took it to the Helmand Director of Education for signature, then to the Governor of Helmand, to the Helmand Director of Agriculture, and finally, to the Land Distribution Center. After Mohammad delivered a copy of the letter to the Taliban’s school director, word of the letter was passed on to the Taliban’s District Director of Education and then to their District Director of Agriculture, who also happens to be their “Officer of Economics” and their “District Governor.” Both were upset that Mohammad had gone first to the Afghan government offices and they wanted to meet with him directly

to hear why. Against the advice of village elders, Mohammad traveled to a meeting place and answered their questions by simply showing them the letter with the multiple signatures required for the land acquisition. He seems to be protected by his provincial and national recognition, and by his ability to work for common goals with a sincerity, firmness, and transparency appreciated by both sides.

Potential to build more schools

Meanwhile in Kabul, President Ghani's Administrative Assistant, Asadullah Ghazanfar, who just last week was promoted to be his Advisor on Cultural Affairs, got excellent reports from Helmand about the work and activities at the school. Mohammad had multiple conversations in Kabul with Asadullah and met twice with the Minister of Education, Dr. M. Ibrahim Shinwari, at his home. Hearing these reports, having these conversations, and knowing how comfortably Mohammad lives in both worlds in Helmand, the Minister asked him if he would act as consultant for their Director of Education in Helmand. At the very same time, the Taliban want Mohammad to build two small schools. They are agreeable to female enrollment at all levels as female teachers become available. They would only communicate with the Afghan government through Mohammad. The Taliban have been inspired specifically by the small school building project in Sarkar where, in a September ceremony, Mohammad helped lay the first bricks for the foundation. The Afghan government took over that project when GVS funds were exhausted in just the privacy wall. So, our GVS Board of Directors fully supports whatever decision Mohammad makes about a formal role as consultant in Helmand for the Afghan Ministry of Education.



Mohammad (crouching) at the brick laying ceremony in Sarkar

Our school is thriving

Although the people of Shin Kalay find themselves in the middle of a conflict zone, in many ways, life goes on as usual. A widowed woman, with five or six children to raise, prepares a large container of rice each morning, and her oldest son wheels it to school on a cart for sale to hungry classmates. From this, she has a small income and more students have nourishment to carry them through a day of school. Boys play ball games at school during recess and girls play "cricket with brooms" on their side of the school. Away from school, children are

encouraged to search peanut fields for any part of the crop left behind after harvest. In years past, children instead helped parents collect opium from poppy fields.



Cooked rice for sale in the morning

The future is bright for former female students

Three young women who attended our first school that was destroyed, have finished medical school, simultaneously gotten teaching certificates, and completed an extra one-year ultrasound course. They are now working in two obstetric clinics in Lashkar Gah, as the requirement for their internships, and they are applying for teaching jobs in Lashkar Gah, if time away from the clinics permits. Two of the three girls at the School of Leadership, Afghanistan (SOLA) in Kabul are doing well in the sixth grade, studying Pashto, Dari (Farsi) and English along with a larger curriculum. The third is struggling and will be repeating the sixth grade to be certain she has the foundation SOLA requires. A fourth female medical student, who is studying at Bost University in Lashkar Gah, sent her CV to the faculty at the American University of Afghanistan (AUA) in Kabul. In a subsequent phone interview, they were so impressed with her record and her English that they have applied for a scholarship for her from the American Embassy. If she is awarded the scholarship, she would have the opportunity to study at the AUA for six months and then to study abroad. She was a student at our first school in Shin Kalay and graduated from our former Advanced Education Center in Lashkar Gah. We are so proud of these courageous girls as their reach for the stars is modeled for their peers. Already, three more girls from Shin Kalay have applied to SOLA.

Your generosity is much needed

Please consider donations for scholarships and non-tuition expenses for girls moving beyond Shin Kalay. Unrestricted donations are equally appreciated, to be used for painting, more painting, and continuation of the second-story privacy wall (for the neighbors!). Large solar panels for full lighting to the school and for the computer labs must await politically stable times, but we have started the search for donors. Please feel free to invite Dr. Kharoti to speak to your school, your church, your mosque, or any organization. His life experience, which began in a camel caravan, is remarkable and unique.

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