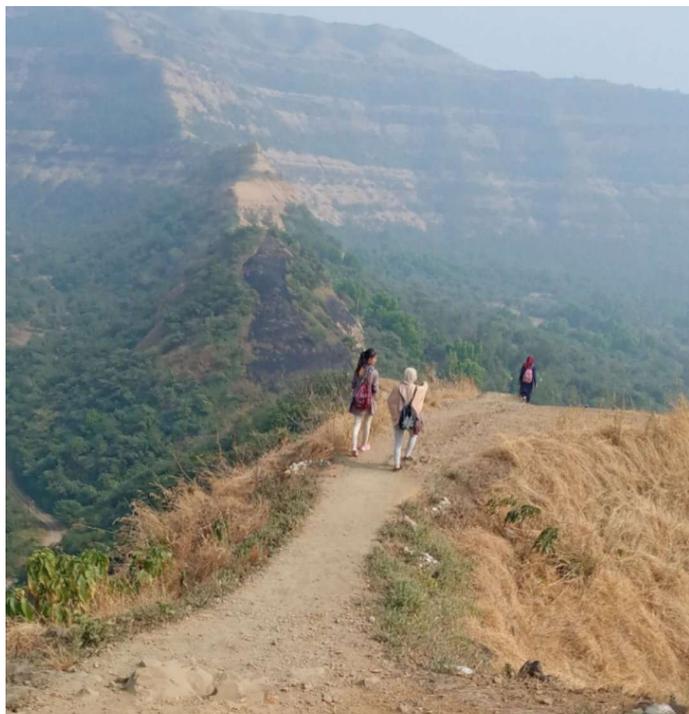




Our school in Shin Kalay has been closed throughout the pandemic. The four GVS-supported girls enrolled at the School of Leadership, Afghanistan (SOLA) in Kabul are at home in Shin Kalay. Local teachers do not have the resources to help students remotely and hope to have the school open this fall. SOLA teachers, though, continue to educate, using an online program, via phone calls, emails, text messages, or by using WhatsApp, Viber and Google Docs. Shabana Basij-Rasikh, the school's founder, says "It's all working, . . . . . (we) refuse to allow any of our girls to fall behind." Her hope is to have all the girls back in school in Kabul by the end of the year, inviting them back in groups, "girls from insecure provinces or from homes where online access is profoundly challenging" first. Each group would quarantine for two weeks before the next group arrives. And as an extra precaution, teaching would remain virtual to reduce the risk of bringing COVID-19 to SOLA until all students have cleared quarantine. Robin Weitzer, a retired ESL teacher of Oregon Episcopal School, has a weekly talk with 9th grader Sadia, using WhatsApp or exchanging texts and voice messages when internet connection is limited. Sadia enjoys the contact and it is good for her English acquisition.

Prior to the school closure, the SOLA 8th graders spent several weeks together studying in India during winter break prior to moving up to the 9th grade. For all the girls, it was their first time abroad. Sadia contacted Robin from India and reported that they were enjoying the different culture and the presence of their English teachers. As their English classes have always been remotely taught, they were excited to have live lessons.



SOLA students enjoy a hike in India.

Regarding the COVID-19 experience in Afghanistan: GVS President, Dr. Mohammad Kharoti's personal sources of information are Afghan Facebook friends and GVS Administrator Ayub. The latter is not aware of any cases in Shin Kalay, but there are many in Lashkar Gah isolated into one hospital. Mohammad confirms that in addition to hospitalized cases, there has been a large excess of deaths in Lashkar Gah, especially among older people, but testing is so limited that few of them are documented as COVID-19. He adds that rural families are quiet about health issues and there is likely under-reporting of illness and deaths within communities. A Facebook friend in Lashkar Gah reported to Mohammad that he attended a family funeral in a village in Nad-i-Ali District. When he showed up wearing a mask, the Mullah presiding over the funeral chastised him, saying the mask was a sign that he did not have trust in God. Mohammad says this is common belief promoted by Mullahs across the country. He remains concerned about the religious challenges to controlling the pandemic in rural Afghanistan, and to the apparent rural lack of concern about it in general, but he is optimistic about the natural isolation of rural communities in Helmand. He remains safe at home here in Portland.

### Public data on COVID-19 in Afghanistan

According to [An interactive visualization of the exponential spread of COVID-19](#) published on the website *91-DIVOC*, the update on Afghanistan on Aug 1, 2020 seems to reflect inadequate testing and large-scale under-reporting of deaths of patients that were never tested, as if most of the severely ill have not made it to a hospital. However, the monthly fatality rate per documented case in July rose from 2.9% to 10.3%, suggesting that sicker patients are now reaching hospitals for treatment.

The UN agencies provide a fuller picture of the pandemic in Afghanistan nationally: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports that as of August 1st, in Afghanistan there were 36,471 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 1,271 deaths over all 34 provinces but concentrated in Kabul, Herat, Balkh, Kandahar, and Paktya provinces. Except for Kabul, all the other areas are on the border with countries from which an Afghan diaspora returned home (Iran, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan). Only 88,200 Afghans (0.2%) had been tested and the 41% positive rate suggested either that testing may be limited to sick patients or that the pandemic is very widely spread. Positive testing is especially high among Afghan Security Force units and health care providers. Excepting these groups, contact tracing would be challenging in the public sphere.

### Local measures to control the pandemic

The Ministry of Interior Affairs banned all large gatherings in mid-March and nine testing sites have been set up around the country, none of them in areas controlled by the Taliban, though. The Taliban have reportedly been asking people to

follow the directives of the government and profess to be involved in teaching, enforcing lockdowns, and allowing entry to foreigners providing health care for the pandemic. But none of the Taliban are medically trained and they have held up food trucks coming from Turkmenistan. Ashley Jackson with the British Overseas Development Institute has heard from Afghan contacts that the Taliban are doing very little on the ground regarding the pandemic.

At the local level in Helmand Province, just west of Kandahar Province, UNICEF opened the first ever UN agency in Lashkar Gah on April 22, 2020. While UNICEF has been most concerned about vaccinations, especially with 20 polio cases in southern Afghanistan in 2019, they have halted their polio campaigns and prioritized the COVID-19 response. Their focus is on distributing bars of soap and educating about hand washing, use of masks, and isolating. They have distributed PPE, face masks, gloves, pumps for spraying, and beds for COVID-19 patients in (unidentified) health facilities in Helmand Province.

### Supporting families in Shin Kalay

A large amount of funding and technical support has been provided by the international community: World Bank (\$200 m), WHO, EU (117 million Euros and tech help), China, UAE, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Turkey, and foundations in Qatar and the Netherlands. Thanks to Friends of Afghanistan (US) and its founder Terry Dougherty, who spent his Peace Corps days in Afghanistan and has been an important donor to GVS, we have funding to distribute food to needy families in Nad-i-Ali district where many were struggling even before the pandemic. This was Terry's idea from the start, and we are grateful for his initiative and assistance. We have added additional funds to the project from a generous donation by So Hum Foundation here in Portland.



Distributing food to selected families in the school's courtyard

The food distribution to the neediest families in Nad-i-Ali District required a lot of teamwork. In Shin Kalay, where the distribution took place at the school, the team consisted of: District Director of Education Mohammad Naim, head teacher Jamal Khan, teachers Mohammad Ali Qani and Jalat Khan,

GVS administrator Ayub, and janitor Mydin who helped with the purchasing and transport from the markets in Lashkar Gah. Nine villages were involved and in each one, teachers who knew the communities well selected the families. The project has reached 88 families, each of whom received nine items: cooking oil, rice, spices, chickpeas, sugar, tea sweets, salt, soap, and matches. One of the recipients of our food distribution (shown in the foreground in the photo below) is a middle-aged homeless and illiterate laborer with a family of 10. He says the food he was given by GVS will last his family three months.



We certainly hope that purchasing the food items in Lashkar Gah and bringing people to the school for distribution did not promote the spread of coronavirus. There does appear to be some distancing in the outdoor distribution photos but no masks. Much greater crowding is common in the markets.

In the meantime, life has gone on with some regularity. Former GVS students, Dr. Fatima and medical student Goutay got married at the school in Shin Kalay on the same day and are living in Lashkar Gah, the former unemployed and the latter still in medical school. Dr. Noor Nama lives in Shin Kalay and is also unemployed but available to the community voluntarily. Dr. Anara is hard at work in Fajara with her medical practice. The boys from our school continue to win at cricket, playing some of their games at home now on the new sports field we added last summer. And two more teams have been formed. When the pandemic permits, Mohammad looks forward to taking Oregon grass seed to grow in the schools' field. For now, all games in Helmand are played on unplanted fields, except for the Wazir Akbar Khan Stadium in Lashkar Gah.

Thank you for your continued support of communities with needs that seems more invisible as the pandemic continues to affect many around the world.

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