

FOR ONE AFGHAN WHO RETURNED, RESOLVE TO HELP HOMELAND GROWS

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Summary: Mohammad Khan Kharoti, back at his job in Portland after a Mercy Corps mission, sees hopeful signs

Mohammad Khan Kharoti returned to his job at Kaiser Permanente in Portland on Monday with renewed respect for American health care and renewed resolve to help his native Afghanistan rebuild its own systems -- of health care, employment and education.

Kharoti, 58, flew back Thursday from six weeks in southern Afghanistan with Mercy Corps. He went to help distribute medical supplies donated by Northwest Medical Teams and flown in by Evergreen International Aviation.

He also went to hear what his countrymen need.

"If we put emphasis on these three areas (jobs, health care and education), there will be peace. There will be prosperity. There will be responsibility," said Kharoti, a nuclear medicine technologist for Kaiser who trained as a doctor overseas.

When Kharoti arrived in Afghanistan, he expected the sadness and destruction that he saw as a doctor in 1986 during the Russian conflict. Instead, he found optimism.

He said people are happy to be liberated from the Taliban. He saw girls studying. He heard music. When his escorts dug their car out of the sand once again after it got stuck, he watched them dance. And he danced, too.

"Now they have freedom," Kharoti said. "They are tired of fighting. Tired of war."

Kharoti's return was announced on the radio in Lashkar Gah, a town of 15,000 outside Kandahar. When he arrived at the hospital where he started his training in 1965, people flocked to his car.

He met with doctors and nurses and later with town residents, sitting on the floors of their mud homes. They told him of being routed from the hospital to private clinics, where doctors could charge top dollar for care. Medical specialties have broken down. Medics wear street clothes to operate on patients. Some hospitals have no sheets for their beds.

"They have lost their way," he said.

Kharoti was impressed, however, with the Mercy Corps clinics, sprinkled in remote villages. Mercy Corps workers have trained residents as community health workers. The relief agency believes in helping people to help themselves.

In keeping with that theme, the international community must help the nation rebuild roads, schools, hospitals and employ Afghans, Kharoti said, "so they can throw their guns away" and go to work.

Kharoti visited a school he helped to start in the village where he was born and where his mother and extended family still live 100 miles southwest of Kandahar. He showed the children pictures from an American college catalog.

"You will be a doctor. You will be an engineer. . . . It is possible. It can be done," he told them. "Study hard."

Kharoti said he is grateful for the opportunity to go with Mercy Corps to Afghanistan.

"I have great love for that country. I have great respect for this nation. That is my birthplace," he said. "This is my home."

Caption: Photo by Mercy Corps

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