

AFGHAN'S HEART BREAKS FOR BOTH HOMELAND, AMERICA

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Summary: Portland's Mohammad Khan Kharoti wants the nation to know Afghans lack many things, including hate for Americans

Mohammad Khan Kharoti turns on the television every day, dreading images of missiles landing in his homeland of Afghanistan.

He thinks of loved ones there: His mother, a widow who has known no life but subsistence farming. His uncle, an amputee from a Soviet land mine. His colleagues from the hospital where he treated bodies and lives ravaged beyond comprehension by war.

"We hope nothing bad will happen," the Kaiser Permanente nuclear medicine technologist said. "The people of Afghanistan have had one huge power (the Soviet Union) attack them, but I think this nation is more caring."

As the United States appears poised to strike Afghanistan, it is a time of fear and sadness for the Portland area's small Afghan refugee community.

Kharoti, who is a U.S. citizen, said he wanted to speak up so that Americans do not forget that most residents of Afghanistan are desperately poor people who do not have any hatred for the United States. Other local community members have avoided the public spotlight, fearing they could be targets of hate crimes.

In the 1980s, Portland's Afghan American population peaked as refugees fleeing the Soviet occupation arrived, said Grant Farr, chairman of Portland State University's sociology department. Farr has lived in Afghanistan and sponsored several refugee families.

According to the most recent census data available, there were 204 Afghan-born residents living in Oregon in 1990. The numbers have decreased as people moved to Southern California to seek a larger Afghan community.

For those who remain in Afghanistan, life is centered on scraping out a meager existence in a land crippled by civil war, occupation and drought, Farr said.

Kharoti's family was no exception. When he was a child, they were nomadic farmers who owned no land, only a tent and a few animals. His parents were illiterate, and there were no schools in his village, Sheen Kalai.

"My dad told me, 'When the school comes, you will attend.' It stuck in my head," said Kharoti, 58. His father died from illness before the school arrived.

Kharoti was 12 when the school was established. His elementary school was near a hospital, and from the beginning he wanted to study medicine.

"Because my dad got sick and died, I wanted to help people," he said.

He went to nursing school, and came to the United States for college. He returned to Afghanistan to receive his medical degree.

Kharoti worked in the surgery department of a city hospital, where he treated the most gravely injured victims of Soviet missiles and land mines.

He decided to flee the country with his family after he saw his four children hiding under blankets as missiles

whizzed by their walls.

They fled to Pakistan in 1987, after setting up a network of drivers who would clandestinely usher them there. He came to Portland in 1989.

All through his life, he has been helped by American aid agencies and doctors who made it possible for him to get a degree and work in medicine here. How could he have anything negative to say about this country? he asks.

Kharoti has not talked to his family in Afghanistan since before Sept. 11. They have to travel to the nearest city and pay a large sum of money to use a telephone.

"It is hard. I have grown up in a hard life, and I do not know what luxury is" -- including the luxury of peace of mind, he said.

Afghan Americans grieved for the victims of the terrorist attacks, and now they feel anguish for their former countrymen, he said.

"We hurt from both sides."

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