



GVS founder, Dr. Mohammad Khan Kharoti, returned to Portland in mid-December from one of his most challenging trips to Afghanistan. Life has changed with the Taliban in control of most of Helmand Province. With this in the background, we report on the current classroom construction, the promise of improved government support of the school with input from President Ghani's office, the progress of our female medical students, and the potential opportunities for four girls to study in Kabul. Mohammad also conducted interviews with an interesting variety of Afghans for a possible sequel to our earlier documentary *Stealing the Light*.

Life under the Taliban

Surprisingly, there have been only subtle changes in the lives of the civilian population in Nad-i-Ali district under the Taliban. Men and older boys must remain unshaven. Teachers must report to work with regularity or lose their jobs. Infrastructure has not been threatened. As described in our last newsletter, the Taliban are now strong proponents of education for all children. But it is the government's Ministry of Education that provides salaries for teachers. This means that GVS must be careful to work with both sides in a perfectly apolitical manner.

Yet the conflict between government military/police and the Taliban continues, touching Mohammad's family directly when one of his nephews, who had gone back to work on the police force, was killed two weeks ago. At the same time, President Ghani wants the Taliban involved in peace talks but first the government must recognize them as an official party. Movement has taken place in this direction with the formal recognition of Hekmatyar and his Hezb-e-Islami party. Discussion about a similar plan with the Taliban will likely not take place until some of their own demands are met.

Mohammad was invited to meet with the local Taliban's "Secret Service." They already knew a great deal about him and his work and wanted to hear more. He is clearly revered by them as a man who has no political agenda and just wants to help Afghanistan. At the end of the meeting they gave him a letter saying that he was free to travel anywhere, with a phone and a camera. A Taliban group who visited the school to meet Mohammad encouraged him to visit the Taliban office in Qatar to meet their highest Afghan leadership. He assured them that any conversation with their leadership would have to be about education only.

In his meetings with the Governor of Helmand (Hayatullah Hayat), Mohammad discussed these contacts openly, as he had told the Taliban he would. The Governor expressed his admiration and the feeling of pride his office has in Mohammad's work, coming all the way from America and taking what they view as significant personal risks. The

Governor even admitted to following Mohammad on Facebook. Transparency with everyone is vital to his safety and success. And it must be clear to everyone that our work is independent of the power structure.

School Operation

Enrollment fell to about 1,800 with the arrival of the Taliban, despite their urging parents to enroll every school age child. Some families were afraid and moved to Lashkar Gah and first year enrollment of girls fell but 650 girls still attend classes. President Ghani's office set up a meeting for Mohammad with the Deputy Minister of General Education in Kabul (Dr. M. Ibrahim Shinwari). Mohammad presented a list of staff requirements drawn up by the director of our school. The Deputy Minister has asked the Helmand Director of Education (Pohandiyar Yaqubi) to fill all staff positions. The list includes 40 teachers, 3 head teachers, a director, an assistant director, 5 janitors, and an inventory security guard. Salaries are all to come from the Ministry of Education because by law the number of students enrolled requires this many staff. On paper this looks great. But will the funds materialize? Currently the government provides only 8 teachers. In the meantime, three nearby schools in the district have closed and the Taliban have asked the teachers and students to commute to Shin Kalay for school. This seems to be working out fine. Since returning home, Mohammad has heard from Shin Kalay that new teachers are already arriving and student enrollment is rising in response. The government teachers are cleared for work by the Taliban.

School Construction

The addition of 25 classrooms on the second floor of the school is taking place in three phases: walls (completed), roofing (16 completed, 8 more to follow), and interiors. With the usual half hour trip to Lashkar Gah now requiring about three hours because of traffic delays on the only unmined and unpaved route available, transport of construction materials has been challenging. During Mohammad's stay, there were only a few days too cold for pouring cement but during those days men were busy setting up cement forms, banding rebar, and hauling supplies. The weather app on his phone for predicting local temperatures and precipitation was operable locally. Without it the workers just leave a pan of water out and do not pour cement if the water is frozen.



Congested highway between Kabul and Kandahar

The costs for supplies and salaries have gone up some with the transportation delays but gravel is now free. In October, active conflict prevented access to the desert around Shin Kalay but the Taliban have since said it is safe to take gravel from local desert sources. The roofing phase of construction should be covered by the funds already provided by Afghan Appeal and The Drever Family Foundation. But the cost of the currently unfunded interior work (windows, doors, plastering) may go up because the price of wood is rising; the plaster work and carpentry require skilled labor from outside of Shin Kalay who may want more pay to work in a conflict zone; and the fine sand needed for plastering must come from the Arghandab River at some distance from Lashkar Gah.



Second floor construction underway as students attend school

Medical Students

The female medical students are all doing well. Three of them at Wadi Helmand are about to take finals for the current semester and will begin their 4th and last clinical year in February. Mohammad spoke with the Bost Hospital Director (Dr. Nasar Barak) and arranged for the students to spend time on the wards three days a week. They have enjoyed the exposure to patient care and real life pathology. Their teachers at Wadi Helmand, who also work at Bost Hospital, are pleased to see them there. Mohammad wants to help them find a good site for their internship, perhaps outside Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Ghutay is doing very well at Bost University where she will be in the second semester of her first year of basic sciences. She travels to her classes by rickshaw about two miles from her home in Lashkar Gah and the university provides a bus on return. Mohammad was impressed with the level of education at Bost, commenting for instance that Ghutay and her fellow students are required to give seminars on medical topics, a good exercise in self and shared learning.

SOLA

Mohammad received a call from Shabana Basij-Rasikh, president and cofounder of SOLA (School of Leadership, Afghanistan in Kabul). He was invited to submit the names of girls who would be interested in applying for admission. If accepted, they would stay in a dormitory in Kabul with girls from all over Afghanistan. The applications have been made

and four girls hope to be invited for interviews and testing to assess their grade levels. It is likely that all would begin in the 6th grade if accepted, although their current levels range from 6th to 9th. Mohammad spoke to our school director about SOLA, but Shin Kalay parents are reluctant to let their daughters live in Kabul, so the current applicants are all from Mohammad's extended family. Certainly, if the girls are accepted and attend, they would be pioneers for other girls from rural Helmand to follow suit.

Filming

Aimie Burns (Rock Creek Productions) provided Mohammad with a digital camera to record videos for a possible sequel to her first film, *Stealing the Light*. He interviewed the Taliban's Director of Education for Nad-i-Ali District, who expressed a sincere interest in girls' education to fulfill the province's need for professional women, especially in the medical field. Mohammad also interviewed two teachers, several girls and boys in their separate classrooms, and the government's Director of Education for Helmand Province. Aimie now has a collection of recordings from several of Mohammad's trips, enough for her next film, we hope.

Mohammad's Departure

On return to Kabul by taxi with his nephew Ayub, Mohammad saw a shepherd and his herd of sheep near the highway and asked the driver to stop. After a short conversation with the man, Mohammad asked him if he would like to sing some old nomad songs. Ayub made a priceless video of the two of them singing and dancing in the desert with the sheep grazing in the background. Click [here](#) to watch the video.

Further Needs

We had projected a need for \$150,000 to complete the roofs and interiors of 25 new classrooms and are on target if the remaining \$100,000 is raised. GVS has \$7,500 designated for this construction. We are deeply appreciative of Afghan Appeal's longtime and on-going commitment to fundraising. Additional sources of support are as crucial as ever in this time of conflict and uncertainty.



Roofing completed on 16 second floor classrooms