

Kabul, Afghanistan 2005-6

[Name withheld]

The author is originally from Auckland where he trained to be an architect and an optometrist. During the last three years he worked as an optometrist in South Dunedin and at the Dunedin Public Hospital in the Ophthalmology Section, School of Medicine, University of Otago.

I'm a New Zealander working for a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in Kabul, Afghanistan. My NGO works in health, education and development in Afghanistan. I work in their eye hospitals and normally repair hospital equipment, make stuff they need and design some of their media. The NGO I work for runs almost all the eye hospitals in Afghanistan, and in 2004 saw over 240,000 patients in 20 of the 34 provinces. The common eye problems are trachoma, cataracts, and conditions associated with malnutrition, but we're also starting to get untreated diabetic retinopathy because of the diet change here in Kabul. We run 3-year training programmes for local ophthalmologists and optometrists. Eighty percent of all Afghan ophthalmologists have been trained by my NGO. Our HQ is very close to the parliament buildings so it is not unusual for armoured vehicles to ring our block. A big boom I heard two nights ago turned out to be a rocket attack on the nearby Intercontinental Hotel. Yesterday morning there was a suicide bombing on one of the main roads. We drove past it twenty minutes after it happened, and didn't see anything at all. Weird. To maximise our safety we receive daily security updates from the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (see box over page).

There's a side of me that quite enjoys the kudos of working in a confusing place like this. This country has become a large part of who I think I am. When I'm miles away from here I reminisce about this weird, horrible, fantastic place with a quiet smile. Recently the Red Cross flew me over to repair some equipment at the eye hospital in Herat, near the border with Iran. I felt like a complete fraud when I found that most of their equipment was irreparable. One

of the hospital workers had more than enough honesty when he answered my question about what had happened to the \$15,000 auto-refractor; "Well we were running it without a voltage stabiliser, and it kept blowing fuses. So we put some bigger fuses in. Now it doesn't work". I did make the hospital laundry-man happy by repairing his old washer and dryer.

In Autumn I went on a two week trip into the mountains of Nuristan. Nuristan is a province between Kabul and the border with Pakistan; you can drive there if you don't mind the nearby war; the road goes through Al Qaeda and Taliban territory. We decided instead to try to hike in over the mountains from the north. It took four days of driving and five days of hiking to get over the 15600 foot pass. We stayed a day and a half, and then left by the same route. Lost five kilos, gained 500 photographs. Brilliant.

Now is winter, friends are a continent away, and the grind of living here beats the novelty. The snowline has descended fast on the nearby mountains. There's a foot of snow in our yard

and our dog's water bowl now has an inch of ice in it. Almost all foreigners keep dogs as alarms, along with 10-foot high walls. You never answer the door; you have a guard for that.

In mid-winter, life here can be extremely sapping. Anything that can bring you a smile is to be savoured. I usually enjoy shopping; cruising the second-hand bazaars is one of my favourite Thursday activities. My weekend here is on the Muslim calendar; Thursday and Friday. I'm fortunate to be with my particular NGO. Most foreigners are not allowed to walk around the streets, especially if they're female. My UNHCR friends were until recently only allowed to travel in convoys of two armoured cars. Even then they only had two armoured cars for fifteen expat staff.

Finding weird stuff in the bazaars makes me smile. English muffins and blue cheese, cast off from the military bases, sold at what we've started to call the 'Used-food bazaar'. Leathermans and iPods (new and used) from the bazaar outside the Bagram airbase. A broken



Italian espresso machine from the local bazaar. US\$30, five hours fixing-time, before it was putting a big smile on my friend's face. The beautifully pale grey Sony stereo I'm listening to, I may have paid too much for it, but I'm enjoying it, and I had a great chat with the guys in the shop where I bought it. They also had a broken telescope; they didn't know how to use or what it was for. We sat and I drew diagrams of solar systems, lunar orbits, moons with craters. "Like rocket?" they asked. "Yeah, crater is like a rocket."

I want to buy some thin tissue paper to make some papier-mâché floor lamps. My Dari (one of the Afghan languages) is pretty thin; I'd be stoked if I could make this request understood. To try, I'll walk 10 minutes through the mud to one of the guys who sells stationary from a dim shop that really specialises in Bollywood posters and plastic flowers. I'll ask my language teacher tomorrow if paper like this exists; if he doesn't know then I'll negotiate a taxi and search the scattered stationary bazaars. This will likely take all day and I will share the streets with pickpockets and guys who want to "bump" into any females they see. Maybe I'll discover some new bazaar selling some weird stuff like last week when I found one that sold single bore shotguns being made by an elderly gunsmith, and fur coats, one made entirely of cat-skins. Incredible. Matching cats.

A doctor friend of mine, angry and frustrated by the ossifying speed that everything seems to move with says with his voice cracking just a little, "Amazingly, some people are helped". It's a funny old place. Sometimes you're convinced you're doing nothing but hinder. That is how life often is here. Sometimes I give up. Often I'm angry and frustrated. My friend can only offer a hug with sign-language. The culture prevents her from doing otherwise.

But sometimes you have the sneaky feeling that you may actually be doing something worthwhile.

ANSO North – Security Incident – Armed attack on NGO – Faryab Province.

Incident report: ANSO N201005-095

Location: Faryab Province, Shirin Tagab district, main north-south route in the vicinity of Qara Shaikhi village near Bai Moghli.

Incident type: Armed attack.

Date/Time of incident: 20 October 2005, approximately 1330hrs.

Report status: Confirmed.

Information: At approximately 1330hrs a NGO vehicle was engaged by small arms fire while travelling south on the main route in the vicinity of Qara Shaikhi village near Bai Moghli. When the vehicle stopped and the occupants disembarked, they were attacked by two armed persons, resulting in four occupants being shot. ANP responded to the incident and an investigation is underway.

Casualties: 1 NGO staff member killed, 3 injured.

Arrest: None.

Assessment: The incident appears to be a deliberate attack against the NGO persons given that the vehicle was displaying identifying insignia. As nothing was stolen from the scene, it is assessed that robbery was not the motive for the attack.

Advisory: ANSO advises NGOs operating in the region to postpone all movement through Shirin Tagab district, and ensure all staff exercise extreme caution. ANSO will continue to monitor the situation and forward additional information.

Above: excerpt from an ANSO (Afghanistan NGO Safety Organisation) report. Non-governmental organisations have provided assistance to the people of Afghanistan for many years while working in many remote and dangerous areas of Afghanistan. Since 2002 civilian aid workers have paid the price of over 45 murders. ANSO aims to maximise the safety of health workers in Afghanistan.

