Arguments

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Afghanistan's long road

Afghan women have seen many improvements since the fall of the Taliban, but much more needs to be done

BY KHORSHIED SAMAD

TOMAS MUNITA, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SLOW PROGRESS: The plight of Afghan women has improved somewhat in the three years since the Taliban were ousted, but life is still hard, even for women in Kabul, some of whom are reduced to begging from motorists.

Under the oppressive Taliban regime, Afghan women had no rights and suffered as non-citizens, forbidden from education, work, proper health care, and travel, even within city limits, without a male guardian or relative. After Sept. 11, 2001, Kabul — and Afghan women — were finally liberated through the efforts of coalition forces. The achievements so far in Afghanistan have been heroic, but the going has been slow, and the long road ahead to democracy is filled with obstacles for the Afghan people, especially women, to overcome.

More than eight million Afghans participated in mostly violence-free elections on Oct. 9, 2004, with women making up a remarkable 42 per cent of registered voters. The election was an astonishing success, surpassing the expectations of even the most optimistic observers. Indeed, the first ballot to be cast was by a 19-year-old Afghan woman in a refugee camp in Peshawar, Pakistan. This small act speaks volumes about the will and determination of Afghan women, and demonstrates that they have come a long way, both socially and politically, since the Taliban were driven from power a little over three years ago.

In last January's constitutional Loya Jirga, it was women who had the courage to stand up and ask the hard questions, stirring up emotion and controversy among predominantly male constituents and political leaders. It was the unity of their voices that ensured that, under the new constitution ratified last year, women are protected as citizens with guaranteed equal rights in Afghanistan.

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Afghan women are now leading the small-business revival throughout the country. At a recent awards ceremony honouring entrepreneurs who have successfully started small businesses with the assistance of microfinance programs, 18 of the 23 recipients were women. Access to media and other forms of expression are also on the rise, including new women-run radio stations. Women by the hundreds of thousands have returned to work and to school to reclaim an education that was forbidden to them during the five-year Taliban regime. More than four million children, one-third of them girls, have returned to school.

However, poverty, malnutrition, poor health care, violence, illiteracy and forced marriage are among the many human security concerns that still face Afghan women today. There are some startling and ongoing challenges that still demand attention and require assistance from the international community.

After almost three decades of war and destruction accompanied by severe drought, Afghanistan has the world's worst health indicators. The country's first National Human Development Report, released on Feb. 21 by the United Nations Development Program, presents a gloomy picture. Afghanistan is ranked 173rd out of 178 nations on the 2004 Human Development Index. Only a few sub-Saharan nations rank lower. Afghans have a life expectancy of 44.5 years, among the lowest in the world. The infant mortality rate is 115 per 1,000 births; in most Western countries, the rate is less than 30 per 1,000 live births.

Although access to health care for women has improved, it is still severely restricted in rural areas. Afghanistan has the highest maternal mortality rate in the world, which means that a woman in Afghanistan now dies in childbirth every 30 minutes, usually without access to even a nurse. UNICEF reports that 1,600 women per 100,000 die in childbirth in Afghanistan — in stark contrast to Britain, for example, where the rate is 16 per 100,000. In the most remote areas of Afghanistan, the maternal mortality rate is 6,000 per 100,000, meaning that one out of every 16 women dies during childbirth. Even if mother and baby survive, their prospects are dismal. One in five children dies before his or her fifth birthday from diseases that are 80-per-cent preventable.

Chronic shortages of trained doctors, midwives and hospitals also mean most women who develop complications during labour are likely to die. There are very few clinics and hospitals dealing in reproductive health and childbirth for an estimated 25 million people who live in Afghanistan.

Another tragic situation has been the reporting of at least 50 cases of self-immolation among very young women in just the last year and a half, protesting their forced marriages to much older men. A fair system of justice complemented by a modern education system can remedy such long-standing traditions that collide with the younger generation's aspirations.

In a country endowed with rich water sources, but plagued by years of drought, 75 per cent of the population does not have access to safe drinking water. And Afghanistan is one of the six remaining countries in the world where polio, like landmines, still kills and maims many children every day.

Although improving, security is still one of the greatest challenges, especially in the Pakistani border regions where there are Taliban and al-Qaeda incursions. The narcotics trade results in ongoing corruption and an imbalance of power in the hands of renegade local commanders, who still manage to defy the reach of the central government.

Wages are extremely low. Civil servants, teachers and even doctors are lucky to receive between $40 and $100 per month. Building up administrative capacity by teaching Afghans modern management skills is a necessity.

The Afghan population is said to be 70-per-cent illiterate, and illiteracy among women in rural areas is estimated at 98 per cent. Even in Kabul, probably no more than half the population is literate. The Afghan government has estimated that nearly 2,000 schools must be constructed every year for the next five years to meet the demand for education.

Education and economic opportunity for all Afghans will lead to improvements in human rights and social equality. But this process will take many years, with democracy still in its early stages of development. The legitimate grievances of the Afghan people must be addressed, and the interests of other nations should not overshadow the need for human security. Afghans should rightly expect to lead a life of dignity, free from fear and disparity.

At two major aid conferences — in Tokyo in 2002, and in Berlin last year — the world pledged strong support for Afghanistan. The Afghans welcomed and expressed appreciation for the donors' generosity. However, the disbursement of funds for reconstruction projects and rebuilding the country's infrastructure has taken longer to materialize. All stakeholders now agree that developmental prioritization and implementation should bring qualitative change to the lives of the people and make the country's economy more sustainable. It is crucial to rebuild systems of agriculture, water management and renewable energy sources, and create opportunities within the private sector that will have a real, lasting and positive impact in Afghan society, especially for Afghan women.

Next month, the annual Afghan Development Forum will be held in Kabul, bringing together donor countries and the Afghan government to review the funding and allocation of aid for various sectors of the economy. Canada is a major force in improving stability and rebuilding Afghanistan. This meeting is an occasion for the donors and the newly elected Afghan government to look at the overall funding objectives and development priorities of Afghanistan. It offers an opportunity to study how countries have and could be spending their aid money on essential reconstruction and development that works in Afghanistan.

It is an opportunity that must not be wasted.

KHORSHIED SAMAD, the former Kabul bureau chief and correspondent for Fox News, is the wife of the Afghan ambassador to Canada.

SUBMISSIONS

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Gonzo, but not forgotten

BY GEORGE S. MCGOVERN

As the candidate who lost 49 states to Richard Nixon in the 1972 U.S. presidential election, I have always been pleased that among the precious few who thought I would have made the better president was Hunter S. Thompson, who went to his untimely grave saying that I was "the best of a lousy lot."

Thompson's position was that I was "honest" — except for one "wicked moment" when I attended Nixon's funeral and said a few sympathetic words to his family and friends. "Yeah," Hunter told me, "you went into the tank with that evil bastard."

Hunter relished such frightful words. "Evil," "wicked," "fear and loathing." These were the words that described the world best for him. Once, when he was pressed into the back seat of my car with three other people, he tried to escape to a nearby bar when I slowed for a red light in heavy traffic. Foiled by the baby lock that had been inadvertently clicked on, he raged at me: "Get me out of this evil contraption before I start killing."

On the jacket of his now-classic book about the 1972 election, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*, he printed a photograph of the two of us with the following caption: "Pictured above is George McGovern urging Dr. Hunter S. Thompson to accept the vice-presidential nomination." In retrospect, I wish I had. Perhaps then, Hunter and I might both still be alive and well instead of dead and wounded, respectively.

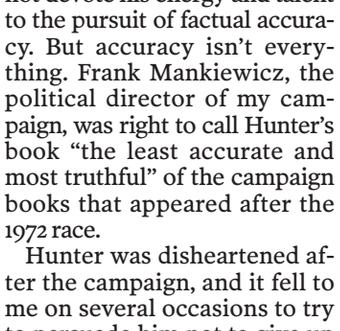
It's true, as many have noted in recent days, that Hunter did not devote his energy and talent to the pursuit of factual accuracy. But accuracy isn't everything. Frank Mankiewicz, the political director of my campaign, was right to call Hunter's book "the least accurate and most truthful" of the campaign books that appeared after the 1972 race.

Hunter was disheartened after the campaign, and it fell to me on several occasions to try to persuade him not to give up on what he called "this f----- up country."

What I didn't get to tell him was that one of the reasons we should never give up on America is that from time to time, as we have been reminded recently, this country produces a genuine original: a Katharine Hepburn, a Ray Charles, an Arthur Miller, a Johnny Carson, an Ossie Davis, a Professor Seymour Melman — or an inaccurate and irreverent and truthful Hunter Thompson.

GEORGE MCGOVERN was the Democratic U.S. presidential candidate in 1972.

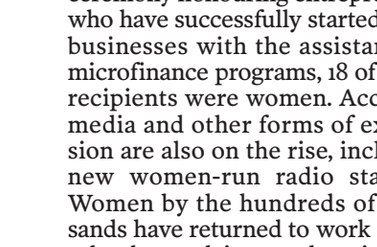
THE LOS ANGELES TIMES



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

RADICAL IDEA: Vice-president Hunter S. Thompson.

LONGING FOR THE DAYS OF MR. DITHERS



WILLIAM WATSON

MONTREAL

The fundamental theorem of economics is that nothing is free. So I wonder how much the missile defence decision cost us.

There's the obvious cost in our relations with the United States. President George W. Bush says he'll veto congressional attempts to keep beef blockaded. Good for him. But that probably has more to do with his relations with Congress than with Canada. You've got to think he won't be bending over backward to do us any favours. What's the trade cost of a hostile president? One per cent of our exports ($4.3 billion)? Five per cent ($21.5 billion)? Hard to say.

Then there's the make-up cost in defence spending. Prime Minister Paul Martin delayed his announcement of the missile decision so the Americans would see the colour of our new defence monies. (Even when he's made a decision, he favours the impression he hasn't.) The headline budget number was $12 billion in new defence spending (though $5 billion is for capital equipment and shows up in spending only over the useful life of the equipment). How much of the $12 billion do you suppose was put there to balance the missile decision?

There's also the domestic balance cost. Think of it this way. The government is aiming for a careful re-electoral balance. If it leans left with missile defence, it has to lean right other ways, for example, with corporate and personal tax cuts. In this budget, such cuts total $12.8 billion by 2010, though they really don't start in earnest until 2008.

If you're a conservative Canadian, you probably wish the government had both signed on to missile defence *and* cut taxes. But get real. It can't enact the entire Conservative platform. Not unless it gets really desperate politically, that is. If it had signed on to missile defence, it couldn't have leaned right on taxes and defence. So which would you rather have? Missile defence? Or tax cuts and more money for military equipment that actually does work? Looked at that way, the decision may not taste so bad.

Missile defence was largely symbolic. Not signing on changes nothing of consequence. The Americans will still shoot down missiles that stray into the neighbourhood. Much as he might like to, George Bush won't really let Osama bin Laden or Kim Jong-il take out Rockcliffe Park. Of course, the weaponization of space is actually a little *more* likely because of our non-participation. Had we gone in, we might have exerted a little sway. Being on the outside, we sway not.

U.S. editorial pages, where our decision got a lot more attention than our decision-makers probably wanted, condemned our habit of free-riding on U.S. defence spending. Actually, going in on missile defence would have been the free ride. The Americans weren't really asking for anything except our saying that we approved. It's our decision *not* to participate that will cost us. For the feel-good policy of saying out loud we don't like George W. Bush and anything he stands for, we risk the president's ire. We'll still be protected, but we're going to take some lumps. That's not free-riding.

It all makes me miss dithering, when the decision was still off in the future. I had the same nostalgic feeling reading the budget. As a document, it suffers from a definite lack of dithering. It's far too decisive. Everybody gets money. And lots of it.

In the last election, only nine months ago, the Liberal platform promised just $28 billion in new spending over the next five years. That's all the country could afford, the platform said. Anyone who told you we could spend more — all the other parties, for instance — was "fiscally reckless."

But that was then. Since then, the government has discovered that, over the next five years, tax revenues will be $62 billion *higher* than the platform said — this despite the fact that the economy will be a little softer than economists thought back then. And there's more good news: By some miracle, government spending will be $30 billion *lower* than the Liberal platform predicted.

So what is the government doing with all the new money? Giving some back in tax cuts and spending pretty near all the rest. Thus, the budget shows that, since the election, the government has committed $83 billion — not $28 billion — in tax cuts and new spending.

That's not dithering. A ditherer sits on found money. Paul Martin, by contrast, has spent just about every dollar he sees coming through the door in the next five years. It makes you long for the days of dithering. Could we go back to dithering, please?

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