

Rebuilding Afghanistan

by Stephen Mitchell

I went into my interview with Naomi Minwalla with my flags of idealism just a-flapping in the wind. I had just learned that this York student spent her summer vacation in Pakistan, working with the refugees of the decade-long conflict in Afghanistan. Operating through an organization called the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Minwalla helped set up income-generation projects for the uprooted Afghans.

I sat down for the interview with a definite mindset. I saw the IRC as an ingenious and practical alternative to what is known as 'band-aid' material aid. You know — bags of wheat, rice, flour, an appearance by Bob Geldof, "Do They Know It's Christmas" . . . "We Are The World," the whole bit.

But it just wasn't that simple.

The main problem, Minwalla explained, was that the 1988 winter withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan did not result in a state of Afghan independence, as the world had expected.

"People are now waiting for the Afghan government to re-install itself at [the Afghan capital city of] Kabul," she said. But a Soviet-supported puppet government, led by Dr. Najibullah, is still entrenched in the capital.

Meanwhile, Minwalla explained, Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and U.S. President George Bush are continuing to supply military assistance to the Mujahideen (the Afghan resistance) to counter the flow of Soviet supplies into Kabul. And, as if matters could get worse, the Afghan resistance has broken down into several persistently incompatible factions.

This is the political climate that, in the last year, has driven 70,000 Afghans out of their homeland and into the neighbouring country of Pakistan. For now, there are virtually no incentives for the refugees to return to their homeland. On the contrary, millions of land-mines wait underfoot back in Afghanistan.

But the Afghans, Minwalla pointed out, are a tough and resilient people. The refugees are now actively participating in the Pakistani economy, and Minwalla reported that Afghans now control the transportation systems operating in Pakistan's northwest frontier province. The people of Pakistan, she added, have been hospitable towards their Muslim brothers and sisters. Whether the already-struggling Pakistani economy will be able to cope with the strain of four and a half million Afghan refugees will soon become evident.

The IRC programme in which Minwalla participated was based among 11 refugee camps in the Hangu Valley, two and a half hours south of the city of Peshawar. The programme was designed to help the refugees develop skills outside Afghanistan so that they might bring their new knowledge back once an independent Afghan government was established in Kabul.

The IRC's income-generation programme was put into action on a number of fronts: the provision of seeds for agricultural developments; the teaching of the necessary skills for the maintenance of kitchen garden plots; the reintroduction of the Russian olive bush (useful for firewood and home-building, it also produces berries); the creation of a number of interest-free loans for the development of small businesses; the development of a concrete beam factory (to replace wooden beams, as wood is no longer plentiful in Afghanistan); and the building of experience in the field of reforestation.

According to Minwalla, foreign aid work is not exactly a cushy job. Members of the IRC did not feel welcome, for instance, after hearing that one of their seed-carrying trucks was blown up while bringing materials into Afghanistan. There were a few death threats. A couple of assaults. A near-kidnapping.

Speaking on a theoretical level, Minwalla also made a note of what she called "the dependency syndrome" of groups such as the IRC.

"There's always a danger with aid organizations," she explained. Relief work, said

