

Four Years in Peshawar

Standing at an observation post on my first trip to the Khyber Pass in 1993 I watched as the seemingly endless line of heavy Bedford trucks passed into Afghanistan through the Torkham border post. Many of these trucks were loaded with Sony televisions that were shipped duty free from Malaysia. They were sent through the Pakistani port city of Karachi to Jalalabad and Kabul, where they were reloaded onto camels and returned over more remote mountain passes for black market re-sale in the bazaars of Peshawar and Rawalpindi. I later came to understand that it was easier for a television to cross the Afghan border than a person seeking refuge.

Today, Torkham is one of the three principal stations where an endless stream of breathless reporters from our western media report on the refugee crisis that is building anew along the Pakistan – Afghanistan border. The Khyber Pass is perhaps the best known but we now see regular news reports from the roads leading from Quetta (in Pakistan) across the Baluch desert to Kandahar, the reputed home away from home for Osama bin Laden. In the north more adventurous news services have sent correspondents through the fabled Chitral and Garam Cheshma valleys across the Dorah Pass into the Upper Panshir Valley in the refuge of the Northern Alliance Forces that fight the Taliban.

I worked and lived in Peshawar, Pakistan from 1992 to 1997 and had the opportunity to travel to all three of these areas both for work reasons and to explore for personal interest. It is a wild landscape that is writ large in the annals of the history of British India and as my time there passed by I began to understand how complex the geopolitical situation had become, and how little we actually understand of Afghanistan – I have often found myself cringing and talking back to my television set during the last eight weeks as “America Strikes Back” in the grossly simplistic parlance of CNN.

In 1994, as part of a team of environmentalists working for the Government of Pakistan and the Swiss-based organization (and UN affiliate) called IUCN- the World Conservation Union I traveled to Quetta to assist with the rehabilitation of the Hazar-Gangi Chiltan National Park. This area was first established in the 1970s (and dedicated by Prince Philip) to protect an endangered sub-species of Suleiman Markhor (a type of mountain goat). The park had been fenced to exclude grazing by the livestock of the local Baluch tribe and to help the natural vegetation recover. The fence had been specially made using metal fence posts rather than wood to discourage its use as firewood by the local residents in this high altitude, de-forested desert. And over 20 years the population of Markhor had risen dramatically as the natural habitat had recovered.

When we arrived we were greeted by approximately 10,000 new refugees from Afghanistan, virtually the entire Marri tribe. They had the misfortune of having been perceived as collaborating with the Soviet troops that had occupied Afghanistan from 1979 until the early 90s. The opposition forces which then included the emerging Taliban faction and many of the various groups that now fight for power in Kabul had made it

clear that the Marri were no longer welcome. So they arrived on the outskirts of Quetta with no food, no water, no housing and little hope of assistance from the provincial government in Baluchistan. In a few short weeks much of the metal fence had been cut down and processed into knives, kitchen utensils and other housewares. Thankfully, the Marri leadership issued tribal edicts which prohibited the killing of the Markhor for food but the park itself is protected name only today. A new flood of refugees, albeit into newly established UN camps, is going to add immeasurably to the environmental stress that threatens all of Quetta.

After returning north and working in Peshawar for most of 1995, primarily to set up a new government environmental program in the Northwest Frontier Province, I began a series of visits to Pakistan's far northern Chitral District. Here we began to work once again on wildlife conservation and environmental planning initiatives. This included a project to improve the management of Chitral Gol National Park, which was a former hunting reserve which is still owned by the royal family in Chitral. The mountains here are high, remote and home to the endangered Snow Leopard and many of its important prey species. The human population is relatively low and the remote location means that the forests and other wildlife habitats are comparatively pristine

Like Quetta, the former British outpost in Chitral was at the extreme edge of India and was pivotal in the intrigue between Russia and England that became known as the "Great Game". In the 1890s grand Imperial figures such as Sir Francis Younghusband, who later helped in the early British expeditions to Mount Everest, served here. He helped to partially suppress the Pathan tribes who populate much of the Hindu Kush mountain ranges along the border of Afghanistan. Today the Pakistani army – the historic Chitral Scouts regiment – still occupies the valley. They persevered through countless incursions by the Soviet troops and the passage of several hundred thousand Afghan refugees that fled through the Dorah Pass (and many others) to escape. After over 20 years, the Chitral refugee camps have transformed into permanent communities. There will be no going back for these families, and they are now being joined by a whole new generation of relatives and family members.

Chitral is one of the mountain enclaves of northern Pakistan that remained as a Princely State long after India was subdivided in 1947, and was semi-autonomous until the late 1960s. It has been home to the more liberal Ismaili Shia form of Islam and conversion from its earlier Buddhist faith occurred much later than the rest of Pakistan. Indeed there are ethnic minorities there such as the Kalash who retain their non-Moslem faith and who have survived even though their three remaining valley communities are access routes to even more remote routes into and out of Afghanistan.

Our work in Chitral was an effort to assist local community development based on the conservation of the natural resource base. To reverse environmental degradation in these valleys is to help to reverse a process of internal migration that sees people move as environmental refugees into the decaying infrastructure of the big cities of Pakistan. IUCN and other organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund and the Aga Khan Rural Support Program are seeking alternative forms of economic development that will help to

stabilize communities, to find food self-sufficiency and to reduce the out-migration of families. Some of the best ideas include the promotion of better land-use practices, improved and diversified crops and the encouragement of eco-tourism into one of the most spectacular mountain landscapes in the world. Needless to say the need to care for current new wave of refugees is taking precedence over many of these longstanding international development programs.

My own personal adventure into Afghanistan through Chitral's high passes came in 1996 when I took time off from work to participate in a mountaineering expedition to Tirich Mir, a 7708m peak which towers over the Hindu Kush. From our high camp we could see into much of the Afghan province of Badakhshan – the present day home of the Northern Alliance forces. After completing our climb of the peak and although technically visaless, but with the tacit approval of friends in the Chitral Scouts we hired pack horses and traveled across the Dorah Pass for a few days of exploring. Within one 24 hour period we met Pakistan tree poachers, Afghan refugees who had returned to mine the semi-precious stone lapis lazuli (using previously unexploded Soviet era ordinance) and Tajik arms smugglers carrying AK-47 assault rifles loaded on the backs of the two-humped Bactrian camels. Life may never quite so exciting!

Adventure aside however, the humanitarian crisis that is emerging along the Afghanistan border region is approaching an acute state, particularly with the onset of winter. Pakistan has had up to 3,000,000 Afghan refugees since the Soviet invasion in 1979. This decreased to less than 2,000,000 in the early 1990s and it has fluctuated ever since through upsurges in fighting, earthquakes, drought and famine. The United Nations has assisted Pakistan in both short term humanitarian relief programs and long-term sustainable development initiatives such as those in which I had the privilege to participate. But all these efforts will come to nought if some degree of stability cannot be achieved within Afghanistan proper. Pakistan greatly fears both the social and political instability that may emerge if yet another major influx occurs. And a destabilized Pakistan with consequent impacts in the region does no one any good.

While some news commentators make the effort to place today's refugee flows in a proper historic context, many reports make the humanitarian situation seem very, very new. It is not. The region has been home to incredible turmoil, intertribal conflict and Great Power intrigue for at least the last 200 years. The Taliban regime is only the most recent chapter in this story – they are not uniquely evil nor do they represent more than a very small fraction of the Afghan people – and they are in power, partly as a result of Cold War era politics which western governments supported with little reservation.

While on balance I find I can do little but support the international effort to get rid of a group which abuses the tenets of its own faith, oppresses women and minorities and demonstrably harbours international terrorist organizations, we do need to consider ourselves responsible in part for today's crisis. As such, and in our own long-term interest, we must make extraordinary efforts to support the re-construction and stabilization of such an incredible part of our very small planet.

Stephan Fuller, November 2001
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