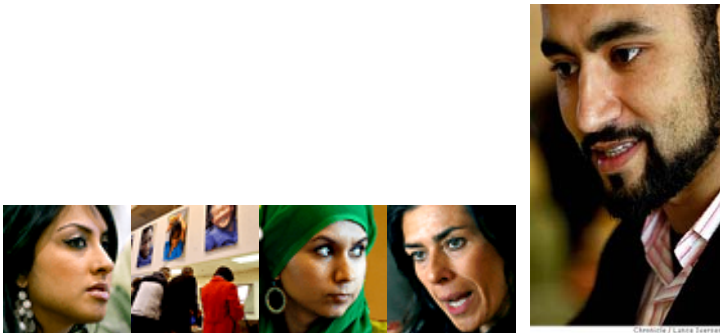


In Fremont, grassroots groups explore ways to rebuild Afghanistan

Jill Tucker, Chronicle Staff Writer
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As a child living under Taliban rule, Humaira Amiri, 22, learned to add and subtract in secret - homeschooled so no one would know. Educating girls in Afghanistan was a sin.

After the Taliban fell in 2001, that changed. Yet children in the war-torn country face new obstacles in obtaining education: poverty, hunger, lack of water and even bombs.

"One day they go to school, the next a suicide bomb (hits) and then they don't go for another month," Amiri said Saturday. Amiri was among more than 200 people who gathered in Fremont's Centerville Presbyterian Church to share ideas and efforts to address those problems and many others in the country suffering from decades of war and conflict.

More than 20 grassroots organizations attended the fifth annual Rebuild Afghanistan Summit, many focusing on helping children, health, infrastructure and financial development.

The event coincided with the release of the movie "The Kite Runner," set in Afghanistan and based on the best-selling 2003 novel by San Jose writer Khalid Hosseini. Those attending the summit said they hoped the film would draw even more attention to a country devastated by endless violence and war.

Amiri stood next to her mother-in-law, Soraya Hakim, the president of the country's Department of Orphanages, part of the Afghan Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled.

The department is working to set up a foster care system for the 11,000 children living in the country's 34 orphanages. The greatest need is to train the orphans in a skill so they can be self-sufficient, Hakim said. Programs teach auto repair and painting skills as well as sewing and cooking.

A few tables down in the church's gymnasium, Mahjoba Raofi handed out information about her newly created nonprofit Afghan Children's Relief Organization.

While thousands of Afghan children are state-supported orphans, tens of thousands more beg on the street, collecting scrap metal or shining shoes for 75 cents a day. Raofi's organization gives the children an allowance if they go to school.

A local volunteer doles out the money based on the child's attendance in class. One family with five children gets \$200 each month to ensure there is food on the table and time to study during the day.

"These kids have to be part of reconstruction," Raofi said. "Who's going to build these roads in 20 years?"

Organizers hoped the summit would help all the grassroots efforts to learn from each other and perhaps to consolidate efforts.

Currently in Afghanistan, fewer than 1 in 4 people has access to safe drinking water and less than 6 percent have access to electricity, said Mo Qayoumi, president of California State University East Bay and the summit's keynote speaker.

The 1979 invasion by the Soviet Union and the subsequent Taliban regime "destroyed every infrastructure that Afghanistan had," he said.

Qayoumi said his biggest hope was for the "audacity of imagination" for what his native country could be again.

Almost all organizations attending the summit focused on an equally optimistic future for Afghanistan.

Nadia Tarzi, however, was focused on its past.

Tarzi represented the Association for the Protection of Afghan Archaeology. Her father, Zemmaryalai Tarzi, is a renowned archaeologist, known for his work restoring the Bamiyan Buddhas, she said. The huge statues carved into cliffs were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001.

Much of Afghanistan's treasured history has been destroyed or looted in the past few decades, its cultural identity becoming the victim of thieves and war, Tarzi said.

Her organization supports excavations in Bamiyan, where her father is working to uncover ancient monasteries and search for the enormous reclining Buddha believed to be buried there. Her group also is focusing on conservation, training and awareness of Afghanistan's existing and stolen antiquities.

While certainly food, shelter and human rights trump all else in Afghanistan now, Tarzi said she hopes historical preservation makes the long to-do list involved in the country's reconstruction.

"It is about preserving the cultural identify of the people of Afghanistan," she said. "If you don't know what your past is made of, you don't know your place in the world."

Online resources

For information about the organizations involved in the summit:

www.kabulmaternity.org/2007Rebuild

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/12/16/BA4ATVGU9.DTL>

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(Note: Afghans4Tomorrow was one of the organizers of this summit and also gave a PowerPoint presentation at this event)