

Plight of War's Trauma Victims Goes Unreported

by Michael Jonathan Grinfeld

There's more to America's war on terrorism than homeland security and military actions against foreign "evildoers." Behind the rhetoric, the bombings and the imprisonment of alleged terrorists is the story of the millions of Afghans who suffered the psychologically traumatizing effects of conflict firsthand in a decades-long struggle for survival that began well before September 11.

Journalists covering the ravages of war on civilian populations usually focus on physical injuries and destroyed property following combat. What's missing is coverage of the long-term psychological consequences that war can inflict upon innocent victims. Akora Khattak, for instance, is an Afghan refugee camp in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province. Some 100 miles kilometers west of the border near the city of Peshawar, it sprang into existence in 1979 following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In the years since, a tent city yielded to row upon row of thatch-roofed mud huts where today approximately 15,000 families, comprising some 110,000 refugees, are still crowded together in near-primitive conditions. Some have eked out lives there since the beginning, and others drifted in over the years as Afghan warlords battled each other following the Soviet retreat, the Taliban rose to power in a bloodletting, and American bombers pulverized what was left.



Akora Khattak refugees exhibit psychological effects of years of conflict. These effects have been largely ignored by reporters in the region. - Michael Jonathan Grinfeld

Javed Nazir, a journalist from Peshawar who is currently a fellow at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, agreed that neither foreign nor Pakistani journalists focus on the long-term mental-health consequences of war. "The refugees have suffered from physical and emotional trauma for year after year, but it's not something that's reported in the media," he said.

Hope Village, a school and social-services facility near Akora Khattak that is operated by Human Concern International, a Canadian human rights organization, does what it can to help, but even its executive director is often frustrated and overwhelmed. "Nothing has changed in 20 years," said Kaleem Akhtar, who spends his time cobbling together the funding necessary to provide even basic services.

Hope Village's newest initiative is an effort to help refugees cope with a scourge of mental-health problems. With as many as 90 percent of the occupants suffering symptoms linked to post-traumatic stress, HCI sponsored a visit by a team of therapists led by Syed Arshad Husain, a psychiatrist who heads the International Center for Psychosocial Trauma, headquartered at the University of Missouri in Columbia. Since 1994, when conflict in Bosnia generated thousands of refugees, Husain has helped train thousands of health-care workers and teachers who treated thousands of traumatized children and adults in war-torn areas worldwide.

During two days at Hope Village in February, Afghan doctors, social workers and teachers, who are refugees themselves, told Husain they witnessed a litany of atrocities, including the deaths of wives, children, neighbors and friends. Among the camp's children and adults, those events triggered nightmares, night terrors, sleeplessness, memory loss, physical and behavioral problems, depression and anxiety, all of which are problems indicative of post-traumatic stress, Husain said.

However, there has been little coverage of the psychological effect of conflict on Afghan children and women, said HCI's Akhtar.

Despite linguistic and cultural barriers, it wasn't hard to get refugees to talk about their experiences. Devastated by losses, they freely offered compelling accounts of their struggles during years of privation in the camp. Journalists covering the "war on terrorism" should also focus on the lasting effects of conflict-induced trauma on civilian populations. We must recognize that "collateral damage" means more than just physical injury, and that it includes a host of other, often lifelong psychological consequences.

In Afghanistan, it's not just America's fight with the Taliban and Al Qaeda forces or the internecine battles among the country's warlords that will derail reconstruction efforts. Whether as many as 3 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan will be psychologically able to make a constructive contribution as the nation rebuilds is an important question and a significant story that deserves attention.

While facing the enormous political, economic, cultural and social problems following the toppling of the Taliban, Afghanistan will also need a population of people ready to rebuild communities. What is overlooked in covering the progress of nation building efforts is the mental- health component, and the effects of wartime trauma on current and future generations.

"The Afghan wars have affected everyone," said one refugee. "Starvation and the psychological problems of their parents means that their children will have 10 times the trauma."

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