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Mabouba her driver Nisar, mom and I traveled up to Pansher Province today. Mom and Mabouba are completing their survey work for Equal Access Radio. A program was developed a year and a

half ago to provide civil rights workshops for primarily women in several provinces, both by radio and in person. The two of them would go into the communities and evaluate the effectiveness of these workshops as well as access to the radio transmissions. Their project is transitioning a bit due to their observations. Mabouba is going to be doing a weekly radio address on public access, focusing on the things that Afghans are doing right in their country as well as what is needed further. Much of their attention at this point seems to be on women, however this will likely turn into a broader focus on Afghanistan, men women and children included.

Trying to get out of Kabul was difficult as someone of importance was being transported in or around the international area in the center of the city near the UN compound. The police and soldiers block off huge sections of the city when this happens, bringing traffic flow to a halt. It may seem reasonable to those requiring the security, yet it really pisses people off. This is definitely not good for relations with the locals. Nisar took some back roads and eventually got us to the highway leading north out to the Shomali plain.

This was my second trip through the Shomali and it was interesting looking upon it with more practiced eyes. This area is the traditional battleground for wars in Afghanistan as it is the northern route into Kabul. It was continually devastated and then rebuilt. Mines, as always in this country are a problem and clearing work continues. There are many relics left over from the war depicted by rusting tanks and blown out buildings. Yet, amongst this you can witness the industriousness of the Afghan people. They are replanting their fields and rebuilding structures. Grape vines seem to be a primary crop, at least along the highway. The whole plain seems to have good access to water, it is lush and green at least this time of the year. Duchans (small stores) spring up all along the highway, yet as is typical they all hold the same stuff, usually right next to each other.

It's interesting that not many afghans seem to collaborate their resources into larger, better operations. This seems to be part of the independent spirit of these people, no one wanting to work for another. They all want to be their own boss, which is commendable, yet I'm not sure if it is good for the development of the country. At a certain point people need to be willing to compile their resources to project themselves into a larger operation with greater gain for all in the long run. I'm not saying that the U.S is the perfect model of capitalism, yet some things have been figured out. Imagine if every person that would work in a supermarket were to instead try to own their own tiny

little market, all right next to each other selling the same limited assortment of things. They would only end up competing with each other, underselling their neighbors. Instead, maintain a “monopoly” on the area and work together, keeping the prices at a level that will sell the goods for profit. Again, this is only a cursory look at the matter, yet I have repeatedly seen this phenomenon in Afghanistan. There are whole streets of small mechanic workshops, all right next to each other. Butchers right next to each other, and what I call “crap stores” all selling the same thing right next to each other. Instead they could build a single large mechanic workshop or butchery and probably be more efficient and make more money in the long run. However this would require people following someone else’s directions, “electing” a leader, which is definitely a problem for Afghans. These people don’t like to be under anyone else’s rule.

We turned off the highway and drove into the Kapisa district, stopping to have yet another lunch of kabobs. I’ve finally gotten used to the traditional version where they sandwich the meat around a piece of fat. Neither mom nor Mahbouba like it, yet I find it a little tasty, as long as I don’t think about it too much and just wrap the whole thing in naan.

From Kapisa we passed through a canyon that is the entrance to the Pansher region. We had to pass by a guard station; they took one look at me and made us stop for further questioning. They didn’t know what to think of us; I looked dubious to them with my red hair and sunglasses, camera in my lap wearing traditional dress. Mom says they thought I was some sort of bad-assed afghan. I usually take my sunglasses off when I get to these stations, yet forgot to in this case. We eventually got ushered through. As we traveled up the Pansher Valleys we followed a raging river that looked like it would be a blast to raft/kayak through. Truly, if the safety concerns weren’t there Afghanistan could one day have a booming adventure travel business. I have rarely seen such whitewater, especially with good access to roads. They all do because that’s where people live in Afghanistan, in the valley bottom, irrigating off of the main rivers that will run through the dry months.

The Pansher region is a safe area for Americans to be in and I feel very little animosity. They were the main component of the Northern Alliance under the leadership of Massoud that the U.S backed financially and militarily to overturn the Taliban. It is obvious that these people are flush with capital at the moment. Compared to the road up to Bamian this region has a perfect, new blacktop with guardrails along the river side. It’s so much easier to travel on. There are many new buildings being constructed, not cheaply either. The military presence here is excessive and well organized, much more so than even in Kabul. It



sounds like though they wear the same uniforms as the other regions, they are essentially under their own direction. President Karzai seems to project that he has control of this area, but I'm not so sure. If it came down to it I'm not so sure that the soldiers in this area would not just abandon the needs of Afghanistan for those of their own region. They had a lot of money and arms given them by the U.S. and have probably retained control of most of these. Is it smart to have regional armies under the control of warlords in the guise of ministers?

We came into a small, but tidy village and met with the first person that Mabouba wanted to interview. He is the headmaster of a madrassa (religious school). Most of the discussion was in Dari, yet I could tell things weren't going well. Mabouba was asking the man if he was using the transmitter that Equal Access had provided the school. It appears they don't. The man was not very receptive to our presence, I could tell that much. After the interview ended and we were back in the car, Mabouba went off about the man. Apparently he was disdainful of us, even Mabouba, seeing her as a Khereji who left the country in a time of need. He was not going to help us find accommodations in the village. This was ridiculous, Mabouba was placed in prison before she was released and allowed to escape the country; he likely would have fled if he could have. He outright said we should not stay in the village because we were not welcome. He did not want us painting the picture of his people needing help from internationals. He was afraid of how he would be thought of in the village and elsewhere. Mom and Mabouba were literally stunned by the man's attitude. They had not once been treated in this manner and it was thoroughly un-Afghan.



Mabouba said that this was a bad sign, as the headmaster was a young afghan man and that she was afraid it was going to be a prevailing attitude in the region. She said that the un-graciousness, even if he did disagree with our mission was unheard of and an

indication of a lack of elders teaching their youngsters the Afghan way. She was literally afraid for Afghanistan if this was any sort of indication of the mood of other young people in her country. We left that village with a bad taste in our mouth, a little nervous about what we were going to find further up river.

We came into the next village and found the cultural center. I could tell mom and Mabouba were a little apprehensive as to what they would find. We were ushered into a room to meet a middle-aged afghan man and what seemed to be a couple of his assistants. Again not much was translated for me, but mom kept me abreast of the general



happenings. I could see Mabouba relax almost immediately and we were received well. She began telling the man about her radio project and asking the man about how well the civil rights workshops had been received. Apparently they have no transmitter in this village, but Mabouba said she would be petitioning Equal Access to remove the one from the previous village and have it re-placed there. During the interview the man told Mabouba about his educational projects. There was a great dialogue where Mom gave the man some good ideas for programs to develop his children's voice on the radio. Program development occurred right then and there with a grant proposal forthcoming in which they will try to get funding for the children of this village to make their own radio shows. It will be an offshoot of Mabouba's weekly radio program and seems like a great addition. We had, after the encounter in the first village been considering heading back to Kabul this evening, yet the man suggested a guest house further upriver that would allow us to stay in the region and get more work done tomorrow. They will meet again on our way out and further develop their grant proposal for the children's program. We had to go to the police station and get permission from the regional deputy to stay, but that went well.

As we traveled upriver we were wondering what the guesthouse would be like. I was prepared for anything and not really expecting a whole lot. We finally stopped outside the compound walls and it didn't look good, but at least we would have a place to stay. As we were ushered in, entered the house and looked at our accommodations. We were stunned; it was great, clean rooms, a bathroom and a kitchen with even a comfortable living room. The nice man who was the owner said we could pay what we thought fit. We really couldn't believe our luck as we were all prepared to stay in a mud room with dusty floors and terrible beds. Not only was it clean and comfortable, but right

along the river. Apparently the man was a friend of Massoud and the home was once used as the Foreign Ministry of the Northern Alliance, go figure.

The ladies went down and sat by the river, debriefing and I wandered around taking pictures, free to do my own thing in safety. A wonderful end to what started out as a difficult day. Tomorrow, given our accommodations we will be able to travel far up the valleys to an area that mom and Mabouba want to survey. I think I will like this region; it is absolutely beautiful, clean and actually fairly well developed. It is what all of Afghanistan could look like if the aid were evenly distributed.

