

5/14/07

Today we woke up to Mabouba shrieking “what a beautiful day, oh I love this place so much” at 5:30 in the morning. I had slept quite terribly the previous night and though tired, was looking forward to the coming day. We drank a couple of cups of coffee and set on our way. Our goal was to reach a small village a ways up-river and do a survey of their access to the radio programming on Equal Access and the affectiveness of the civil-rights programs being provided.

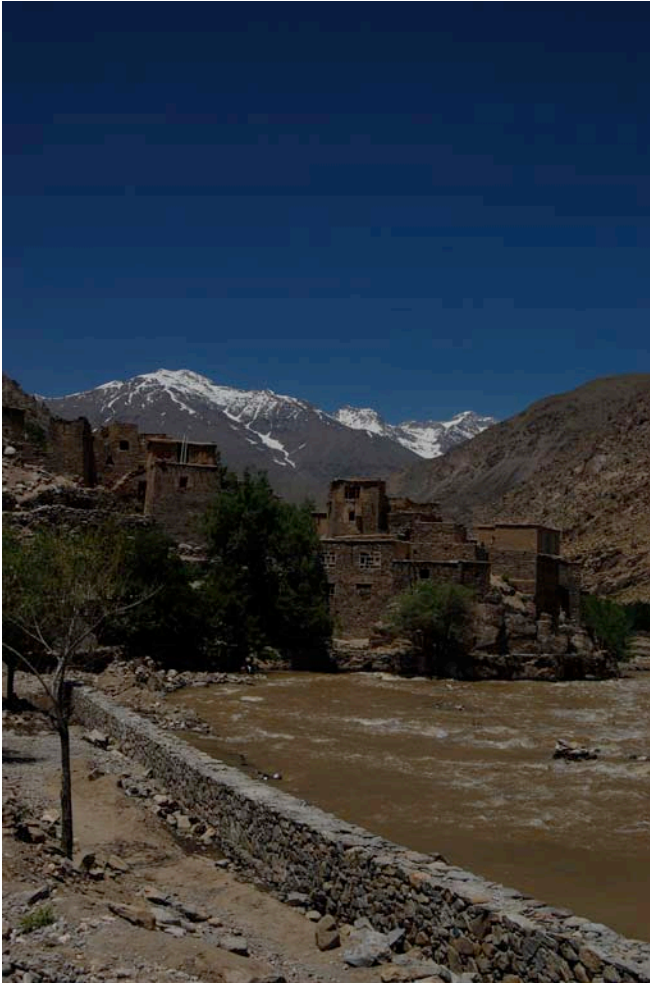
The wonderful blacktop road ended about a mile up-river from the community we were staying in. So much for that little bit of luck, as it turned into what we had originally predicted; terrible, narrow and rocky. As we were trying to get through a section of the road cut high above the rushing river we came upon a car



coming the opposite direction. Nisar, who is not a very good driver, did not do what he should have done when the on-coming car pulled off to the side. He stopped where he was instead of trying to pass on the cliff-side, obviously not confident enough to get around. He would have been fine but I guess prudence is a virtue in most situations such as these. He also knew that if he came anywhere close to the edge Mabouba would have bitten his head off. Instead the oncoming car came right up to us, where there was no option for passing. The driver got out of his car and came up to ours. He took one look at me and passed by my door to open up my mom’s and have words with us. I just about leapt out of the car, the audacity of aggressively opening a woman’s door instead of mine to try and intimidate us. I am not at all a violent man, but in this case my blood started to get a little hot and I got ready to open my door to get in the man’s way. Luckily Mabouba started talking to him in pharsi and he was caught aback, changing his tone to a less hostile one, asking for us to back our car up a way

This little incident aside, we continued up-river asking directions to our village. Wow, the Pansher is beautiful. Green terraced hillsides and quaint villages above a raging river with snowcapped mountains in the distance. This area was much more

intact, as the last war to touch this area was that against the Russians. The Taliban had



been kept out of the region by the Northern Alliance and Massoud throughout their domination of most of the rest of Afghanistan. The difference between this and other areas of Afghanistan was clear. Walls and building were in better shape, looking well formed and older. The people had a different attitude as well, not quite as humbled by their difficult experiences; I found them intelligent, strong, confident and engaging. The Pansher people are quite varied in their appearances, some with red or blond hair, blue eyes and fair features. They are an outgoing people even to the point of being obnoxiously so, which is saying a lot for someone used to the Afghan nature.

We wound our way further up river, with the road getting worse as we went higher up. At some points we were literally driving in the riverbed with a couple of water crossings necessary. One of these

was with water up to the middle of the doors. I was a bit nervous, especially with someone else driving. I didn't want to get stuck up here with no other cars to back us up. I had to teach Nasir how to use 4-wheel drive properly and how to get through these water crossings. We did not have a proper exhaust system for this kind of stuff, but we made it anyways, luckily.

At one point we picked up a young boy whose mother asked us to take him to the village that was our endpoint. He was courteous and quiet, riding in the way-back of the SUV we were driving, helping us find our way. This last part of the drive was especially slow given the condition of the road, but oh was the scenery beautiful. We finally came to the end and the village we were looking for. As we emptied the car in the middle of the small bazaar, we were immediately circled by about 40 of the villagers, primarily men and boys. I usually get a little wary in these circumstances but everyone seemed just curious about us, especially me. I always draw the most attention in these situations and am getting used to it. I just affect the attitude of being kind and generous, yet they had better not mess with me, or the women I am traveling with. Given my size and with my sunglasses, I think they usually at first take me for a bodyguard of some sorts, which is fine with me. Let them think I'm carrying a gun under my vest until I'm sure that their intentions towards us are not malicious. As in every other meeting with a new village

I've had, things went well and we were accepted to be good people. I let my guard down and smiled a bunch, saying hello to all the little boys and shaking their hands, which they think is a hoot.

Mabouba eventually found out that the radio transmitter was located in the cultural center and controlled by a madrassa. This was located far up the hillside, necessitating a walk. As we started walking up, with a boy and a man as guides, it became apparent that it was going to be a little too difficult for Mabouba (who is 59) to make it much farther up the difficult trail. We got to a point where it was cool and shady and told the boy to bring the Malawi down to us.



While we were waiting for the interview, a woman and her daughter showed up. Mabouba called her over and began asking her about herself and her access to the radio. This woman looked to be about 35, had 16 children and was quite beautiful though a bit worn out by the difficult life she had had. She was very affectionate with Mabouba, telling her all about her life with her husband and

asking if we could come up to her house for chai and food. We declined the request, but she talked with Mabouba for quite a while until the Malawi showed up. It was apparent that her access to the programming was not very good, but she would be interested in it. It would help if the programs were at 8:00 pm after the work was done and the electricity was turned on for a few hours. This was taken note of.

The Malawi showed up with a few other young men and some young boys that had been hanging around came and followed. Mabouba began interviewing



the man, who was a typical religious leader with big black beard and white hat. I have yet to have any good encounters with men that have big black beards but this one went all right. He described the educational programs for the girls of the village and the access to

the radio programming. They can get the program up on the hillside, but tape it for people to listen to in the bottom of the valley. At least this is what he claimed. He also claimed that around 600 girls were getting an elementary education in his and the surrounding villages, with half-day shifts of classes. This seems like a large number given how small the village is; yet I guess it is possible. Hopefully he's telling us the truth and not just what we want to hear. They are not teaching women, just young girls up to the age of about 10 years. I guess this is a start in a country that for the past decade previous to the fall of the Taliban allowed no female education whatsoever. This meeting went okay, however I have some doubts as to the commitment this man has to equal education for both boys and girls.



The madrassas have often been the focus of aid from the West as of late. I believe this stems from a hope that if we incorporate the Islamic religious centers into our system of aid that our credibility in the Muslim world will be increased. While earning credibility with other countries in the region is important, it should not be done at the expense of the individuals we are supposedly trying to help. What can we expect from local leaders of whose interpretation of their religion and the cultural context of that interpretation is contrary to our ideals of equality and civil rights. I'm not saying that they should be left out; they should be incorporated, but monitored closely if they are the ones that are supposed to distribute our aid. Otherwise we will once again end up backing the wrong faction. At what point do we stand up and say, "these are important items that our aid should be contingent upon"? I'm not sure what the answer is. It's a very sticky situation, as we don't want to be seen as imposing our own views on the rest of the world. However, I am firm in the belief of individual rights for women, men, children, ethnic/religious minorities and all members of society that wish to live peaceably within such. Do we have the right to impose these very basic views? I hope so, but am not sure that everyone agrees with me. Most Americans would, however some

religiously strictured societies might disagree and we have to respect this to a certain extent. We cannot force change upon people, it has to be desired from within. If the people desire it then we should do what we can to help produce change. If not, leave them to their own devices. Unfortunately those within a society that usually have the loudest voice are not typically those who need to be protected, but the ruling class that want things to stay as they are. When we do decide to interfere it needs to be thoroughly researched and thought out, for the good of all members of a society. As of late, we have too often

listened to the voices *we want* to hear, to back the cause *we want* to enforce.

We finished up the interview and made our way slowly down the hillside. We left the village, picking up an old man needing a ride down-river. I



was glad to not know pharsi for once as he talked Mabouba's ear off the entire time. He was a nice old man but absolutely would not stop talking the whole way. We dropped him off in one of the villages and continued on, wanting to make our deep river crossing before the water came up in late afternoon. We made the crossing and stopped for some lunch under the shade of a large mulberry tree. We watched some men working on reinforcing a retaining wall damaged by the spring floods. They were playing as much as working, splashing each other with water and generally having a good time.

After lunch we continued on to our guesthouse, all quite hot, dusty and tired. I took quite a nap, falling into a deep sleep. We had one more piece of business; to go back to a cultural center we had been at the previous day and collect a letter from the director that would be used to fundraise for the program developed the day before. When we arrived he was not there, as he was attending to the death of four people that had driven off the road when their driver tried to pass by a goatherd. He apparently put the car in the river and everyone drowned in the rushing water. This was very sad and totally avoidable. As we were leaving to go back to the guest house the man showed up and promised to work on the letter and get it to Mabouba in Kabul.

That night we relaxed in our guesthouse and I cooked a dinner of pasta with red-sauce. It was simple but good. We went to bed early, getting ready for the 5:30 wake-up call that was bound to come the next morning from Mabouba. We were to head back to Kabul in the morning, looking forward to showers and fresh clothes.

