

5/16/07

Yesterday's big adventure was a visit to the Allahoddin orphanage in Kabul. This is the orphanage that the staff of PARSA has been working with for the past eight months. It is because of the conditions found here that we had a meeting earlier with the deputy minister in charge of Martyrs and Social Affairs, along with several other international NGOs in the first week of my trip.

PARSA staff, with my mother at the helm had "blown the whistle" on the conditions at the orphanage, inciting a larger investigation into these homes in Kabul and throughout the rest of the country. I was curious to see first-hand what these poor children are dealing with.



When we arrived the PARSA Well-Being staff headed off to start their children's program of health education and yoga with the boys that has been going on for a while. Yasin, my mother and I toured around the common area and the boy's dormitories with a woman from the European Commission, who was here to see first-hand the conditions of the orphanage. The European Commission is in control of 30 million euros in donations to Afghan social causes. This woman will be presenting her findings

and could possibly recommend that use the information gained here to leverage the ministry in acting swiftly and concisely on the recommendations of the recently formed committee investigating conditions throughout the country. The dispersal of this funding could be conditional and tied to the ministry acting on the recommendations of the committee formed to investigate the problems. This is potentially the leverage that my mom has needed, helping to legitimize PARSA's role in the matter as the initiating voice for systemic, long-lasting change.

As we toured through and our presence became known I could see the children running through their rooms straitening up their beds and making it look nice. There looked to be fresh new sheets on all of the beds, which Yasin said was a very recent change. He commented that it appears that the pressure they had put on the minister had started to pay-off a little. On the surface things





looked to be in better order, much nicer than previously described. To me it seems like the orphanage staff are trying put a cleaner face on the problem, yet Yasin and I agree that it doesn't matter if they are doing so just to try and keep their jobs, as long as the children are getting the care they need we are happy, this is why PARSA is working so hard. However, the smell of dirty bodies and unclean facilities permeates the buildings. It's much harder to disguise these things and this tells the real story of the orphanage. I could see this is what the woman from the European Commission was overwhelmed with. She has seen many orphanages and probably knows what to look for, it's hard to cover up certain basic needs going unmet.

At one point we stopped in and observed what the PARSA staff were doing in their program. It started with some discussion on basic hygiene; washing hands, brushing teeth, covering your mouth when you cough etc.. The children would be asked



a question and given turns to answer. They very proudly stood up and presented what they knew on the topic at hand, obviously loving the attention and commendation this brought. The program then continued with some basic yoga presented by a new PARSA



staff member, an Afghan American named Molly. She was a Yoga teacher in the States and has a Masters in education. She has great ideas and will be a great contribution of knowledge to PARSA. She has developed a children's yoga program that will probably bring good benefit to the kids here. At first the boys were a little "squirrely" and self-conscious about the class, but as it went on they became more centered and serious about trying to do the moves right. They were obviously having great fun, despite any initial embarrassment. My presence with the camera was contributing to the embarrassment so I didn't stay long.

As I exited the room I came out into the dark hallway where Yasin, mom and the woman from the EC were talking with about 15 little boys. She was asking questions such as, "when was the last time you were allowed to bathe? how do you like it here?". The boys had no problem voicing their complaints, though they said that the staff had threatened to



"kill" them if they did so. I'm not sure if this was a literal threat, an exaggeration by the boys or a misinterpretation of a phrase, but the intent by the staff was clear. The kids were not to talk of their problems to outsiders anymore. They said they weren't afraid of this, likely because they have learned they have support from outsiders that will watch out for them. Several had medical problems that were unattended to, one boy had blood in his urine, and several had foot problems. When asked about the last time they bathed they said that the shower facilities were now working, but when they had requested access from the staff they had been denied. The boys said the last time they had bathed



was when it had snowed (months earlier). I could see myself, when entering the compound that children were using the water pump in the middle of the courtyard to wash themselves, though obviously not completely, or with soap. . There was laundry hanging off of playground equipment in the courtyard and girls washing clothes in the shade of slides,

apparently they still have to do this themselves. Hopefully they are not still being forced to do the boys laundry as had been previously discovered.

I kept watching the EC consultant's reactions and could tell she was distressed. I had at first thought she might be duped by the tidiness of the rooms and clean sheets on the beds, thinking that all was well. But in conversation afterwards she was more appalled at the conditions than I was. Again, you can't cover up the smell, or ignore the complaints of the young boys we talked to. Despite the



small changes there are so many more needed. The buildings themselves look terrible, the outsides and all the rooms need re-painting. Though there are more pressing needs, I believe this to be important too. It is crucial to a child's feeling of self-worth to be in a place that is comfortable and looks nice. When this is the case they valued, that people care about them and what happens to them. This is especially important to a child with no family.

These children deserve to be treated well. I was not allowed to visit the girl's dormitory so most of my interactions were with the boys. They were gregarious and fun. They loved having their picture taken and getting to see themselves on my camera. They jumped around, walking on their hands performing all sorts of acrobatics. They started getting more adventuresome, jumping off beds and I started to worry they would hurt themselves so stopped taking pictures of them. Instead I tried talked with them, they loved displaying all the English words they knew.

Today some breakthroughs were made. Enough pressure has been put on the minister that he is apparently starting to enact some changes, even without the Committee's report. The National director of the Orphanages has been moved into the orphanage to intervene and monitor the goings-on more directly and to begin implementing what changes can be made immediately.

I watched a conversation with Yasin yesterday with one of the supervisors of the orphanage where she told him that she didn't want PARSA to be in the orphanage. Yasin stated that it didn't matter if she forced PARSA out of the orphanage, he is a citizen of Afghanistan and will himself fight to improve conditions for the needy children of his country. He was not going to go away. She in the end agreed to continue to allow PARSA access to the orphanage. It is my opinion that if this supervisor continues resisting outside intervention and help she would eventually lose her job, there is too much momentum for change at this point, too many people know about the problems. If she embraces the outside help and works hard to become part of the solution, she will retain her position and will likely be a very positive contribution. Though I have not met with her directly, she appears to be a strong woman. It's better to have her on your side than to fight against her.

It appears that through all of the difficulties, positive change is beginning to occur, at least in the Allahoudin orphanage. This is only the start of what is needed, but



it's something. I am so proud of my mother, Mabouba and PARSA staff for taking the problem to the Ministry and not relenting, despite what was at times strong opposition. Though a small organization they have gathered enough international pressure to start things rolling in the right direction. At the heart of it, through all the political wrangling, everyone really does want the children to be well taken care of. But first people had to admit there was a problem. Bureaucrats, afraid of losing face, and likely their jobs were resistant to do

this, but forced to in the end. It is a testament to what power a small grass-roots organization of concerned people can have when they are invested in making a difference.