



**Summer 2003 Journal from the Field
June 10, 2003**

Dear Friends—

We are delighted to report to you on our visit to Afghanistan this past summer. Our trip began in Kabul, where we met the invaluable Dr. George Nercessian, a Canadian forestry expert fluent in Dari, the Afghan language. We were also joined by our Co-Chair, Professor M. Ishaq Nadiri, who was in Kabul on business, and our other co-founder, Mohammed Anwarzai, who has been working as an advisor to the Afghan Foreign Affairs Ministry, as their schedules permitted.

Our first days in Afghanistan evoked an extraordinary range of emotions. We were struck by the astonishing courage, energy, optimism and hospitality of the Afghan people as well as the devastation that is everywhere.

Although Kabul is bustling with energy, trade, construction and traffic, large parts of the city have been totally destroyed. We were fortunate to stay in a wonderful guesthouse with a lovely rose garden in the middle of Kabul, run by the director of the Afghan Refugee Education Project (AREP). Omar Zakhilwal, an Afghan by birth and founder of Partnership Afghanistan Canada (PAC), was also in residence there, working as a senior advisor to the Minister of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. We decided to establish GPFA's Kabul office in this secure, hospitable, well-located compound.

Our first venture outside the capital was north to the Shamali Plain. Surrounded by snow-capped mountains, this area once was, and could again be, the Napa Valley of Afghanistan. The weather—blue skies, low humidity—was glorious, but the widespread destruction was appalling. In this area, the Northern Alliance met and stopped the advancing Taliban. While some of the Shamali vineyards have been revived, and were green and full of the promise of grapes, far more were lying unattended because farmers had fled the war, or because returning refugees do not have money to resuscitate them. In a cruel irony, Afghanistan has endured a seven-year drought, leaving the *karez*s (underground irrigation systems) nearly dry in many areas, although last winter's snows were starting to reverse the drought. Many *karez*s were destroyed by Soviets and the Taliban but repairs are underway as resources become available.

Mir Bacha Kot proves beautiful, but...without water

In the district of Mir Bacha Kot, we toured once-bountiful orchards and vineyards and sat under glorious shade trees with young and old Afghans whose faces reflect ancient traditions and hope for better days to come. In two days we drank more tea and, seated cross-legged on carpets, were served more wonderful meals than we can recount. Villagers told us tales of horror — atrocities committed by the Soviets, Taliban and *mujahadeen* during the long civil war in Afghanistan. Yet these villagers talked more of the future than of the past as they explained how we might help them realize their hopes for a better life. Meeting with two village councils in the district, we confirmed their need for viable agro-forestry projects.

Sadly, it became apparent that the lack of water would be a major impediment to our implementing replanting projects in Mir Bacha Kot at present. Engineers from the Ministry of Irrigation and Environment (MOI) confirmed that, without a significant increase in rainfall and snow, construction of a multimillion-dollar hydrodam was necessary — far beyond GPFA's means.

Found: A new home for our projects

We redirected our efforts to finding an area with adequate water supply to implement our plantings. We held non-stop meetings with leading international aid organizations, government agencies and other NGOs to assess the cost and feasibility of our projects, to identify available expertise and resources, and to obtain advice and support. We met with William B. Taylor Jr., the then-U.S. ambassador for donor assistance, who was very enthusiastic about GPFA's agro-forestry focus and offered to assist us. Ambassador Taylor, with whom we have since been in contact, has returned to Washington as the Afghanistan Coordinator at the State Department.

MOI engineers led us to a more promising site for GPFA's agro-assistance projects—the Guldara District. As we climbed into the mountains, with rushing brooks, waterfalls and lush vegetation, these specialists confirmed what we saw — that available water could sustain growth. We resolved to implement our first planting projects in this devastated area of 63 villages in the Kodaman valley of the Shamali Plain. Meeting with the *Woluswal* (council chief) of Guldara and the village elders, we learned that during the final battle between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, the region lost 80 percent of its orchards and vineyards, and most of its homes were destroyed. Today only 5,000 families now live in the area, down from 18,000 before the wars. Some 1,100 families are destitute, including more than 375 headed by widows. The average family numbers six to seven. Many returning residents must now travel into Guldara to grow whatever wheat, vegetables and fruits they can on their land.

GPFA's initiative in Guldara, approved by the board upon our return, will enable war-refugee widows who head families and other destitute returnees to cultivate their small parcels of land that currently lie fallow. Our projects will quickly assist them in permanently returning their land to productivity — generating income and food as soon as next year. During 2004, if funding permits, some 30 or more fruit orchards and vineyards will be restored with GPFA support, including tools, saplings, vine cuttings, fertilizers, extension and farm-to-market assistance. Vegetable seeds will be provided to inter-crop between rows of trees to yield quick produce and income for the families. And, to ensure a supply of high quality trees and vines for future plantings, we will establish several small-scale nurseries.

We thank you wholeheartedly for your generous support to date, which has enabled the Global Partnership for Afghanistan to come this far.

We will contact you soon with more details about the fast-approaching spring planting season.

With our deep appreciation and very best wishes,

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