Return to Afghanistan

By Reese Erlich

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Derrill Bodley was visibly nervous as he walked towards the mud-walled house on the fringes of Kabul. Would the woman remember him? Would he be able to emotionally connect with her again?

Two years ago, almost to the day, Derrill visited this home with a delegation of other Americans who had lost relatives on Sept. 11. The non-profit group Global Exchange had arranged a meeting in January, 2002, between the Americans and some of the Afghan victims of the war on Afghanistan. This time around, he is on a two-week journey to meet with dozens of aid workers, UN officials and ordinary Afghans.

Gulmaky, the woman Derrill met on his last trip, lost her 19-year-old son when a U.S. bomb flattened one room in her home and destroyed her neighbor's house. There were no military targets nearby. It was one of the so-called smart bombs advertised by the U.S. military that killed and injured thousands of Afghani civilians during the war.

"Maybe you remember me," Derrill says to Gulmaky, somewhat hesitantly. "We all came and saw your house. Now I bring you a picture of my daughter, Diora, who was killed on Sept. 11, 2001. I want you to have her picture." Gulmaky does indeed remember. The rubble from the flattened room has been cleared away, but she does not have the money to rebuild the house. "Nobody ever helped me," she says.

"The U.S. policy is not to count the damage to the civilian population," notes Derrill. While the U.S. government has established a multi-billion dollar fund to compensate families of Americans who died on September 11, it has done nothing to help the innocent victims of its war on Afghanistan. The irony isn't lost on Derrill, who gives Gulmaky $200 to help with living expenses.

But unlike Derrill, most Americans have lost track of Afghanistan. The mainstream media have forgotten the country except when U.S. soldiers are killed. "People in the U.S. are not given the opportunity to feel or see these things," he says. The $200 is part of a bigger plan to pledge a portion of his 9/11 Victim's Compensation Fund settlement to help those killed

by recent U.S. military operations and to grassroots organizations working to organize civilians in this war-torn land.

The fund is also a sign of just how far Derrill has come from the man he used to be. While he came of came of age in the '60s, the political radicalism of that era passed him by. Unlike many of his peers who became anti-war protestors, he chose to serve in the Army and later became a music teacher at Sacramento City College. "I wasn't a political activist back then," said Derrill. "It's a little late, but I'm becoming one now."

But it is tough to do good in a country devastated by war and U.S. occupation. Take, for example, a small sewing school in another part of Kabul, a one room, mud-walled building that is a chilly 50 degrees inside. Thanks to $400 donated by the Share Institute in Sacramento, California, the NGO Humanitarian Services Organization for Women (HSOW) was able to buy the sewing machines, rent the room and buy material to be made into children's clothing.

Men and women sit at four, hand-cranked sewing machines. Derrill and I meet a 25-year-old war widow whose sewing supports her three children. When Derrill asks HSOW director Roya Mohabat about the presence of men, he explains, "They are for selling (the clothing). Our Afghan custom (doesn't allow) women to carry things to the bazaar." While the U.S.-backed Karzai government has opened schools to Afghan girls, and some Kabul women walk outdoors without the all-covering burka, women are far from free in post-war Afghanistan. A combination of custom, an extremely conservative interpretation of Islam and lack of action by the Karzai government severely constrains the options available to NGOs helping women.

Derrill wants to encourage this NGO, which at least gets a few women out of the house and into productive work. He quietly slides some U.S. banknotes to the widow before we depart, and promises more for HSOW.

If conditions are tough in Kabul, they are far worse everywhere else in Afghanistan.

In Kandahar, at around 11:00 p.m. one night, the doors and windows of our house shake violently. Derrill bolts out of bed, only to discover that a bomb has exploded some blocks away. He wants to check it out, but fearing the possibility of a second bomb timed to explode just when people rush to the scene, we decide it's safer to stay indoors.

Over three days, Kandahar is rocked by guerrilla attacks on a UN office and a number of military targets. They don't kill any soldiers but result in the deaths of 15 civilians and injure dozens more.

The U.S. maintains a fortified base near the Kandahar airport, but can't really protect either its own soldiers or Afghan civilians. The lack of security makes NGO work even more difficult. Sarah Chayes, a former NPR reporter who until recently headed a humanitarian

group in Kandahar, can't even get women together for a sewing co-op because husbands won't let their wives leave the house. So they visit each home individually, bringing material and picking up the finished garments.

Local government officials have only the faintest allegiance to the government in Kabul. Local Afghan officials transport heroin and hashish, cut deals with Taliban guerrillas and generally act like warlords, says Chayes. She hopes to find international funding to modernize a local dairy co-op, the only source of fresh milk for the city. "But if we are successful," she says, "a local warlord could take it over and tell us to leave town."

Despite all the obstacles, Derrill's convinced that small NGOs can reach people that others cannot. "They're doing things that the UN can't do, the Red Cross can't do, and certainly the U.S. government and corporations can't do," he says. He hopes his contribution to these organizations will not just help undo the destruction of war, but also prevent wars of the future. "I'm interested in dealing with the front end of the war cycle," he says, "to prevent the war and violence in the first place."

Freelance journalist Reese Erlich co-authored the book 'Target Iraq: What the News Media Didn't Tell You,' with Norman Solomon.