Peace Profile: Afghan Peace Volunteers

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Peace Profile: Afghan Peace Volunteers.

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Afghan Peace Volunteers and Voices for Creative Nonviolence

Abstract
After nearly forty years of perpetual bloody conflict in Afghanistan, the Afghan Peace Volunteers (APV)—a small cohort of multi-ethnic Afghans—have concluded that nonviolence is not merely effective, it is essential for the long-term stability of their nation. Established in 2008 as Our Journey to Smile, the APV is a publicly identifiable organization promoting peaceful change in Afghanistan. Its members have now spent five years living out an experiment in peacemaking.

A university seminar held in the Bamiyan province, for the purpose of analyzing how peace could prosper in Afghanistan, served as a catalyst for the APV. Nearly sixty multi-ethnic Afghan students participated, and at the end of the seminar, many of them concluded that peace was impossible during their lifetime. But a number of others were unwilling to accept the conclusions of their classmates and began publicly declaring that war, violence, force, and domination (whether by foreign forces or by infighting among various Afghan factions) have failed to bring safety, security, or peace. After a study of history and an assessment of global social movements, the students concluded that "there has to be a better way"—an alternative to the many years of violence. Thus, they formed Afghan Peace Volunteers to identify a third way to address the challenges facing their country: its
ethnic divisions, trauma from nearly four decades of violence, the presence of foreign forces in their nation, corruption, and poverty.

Under the mentorship of a Singaporean physician living in Afghanistan, "Dr. Hakim," APV concluded that paradigms such as those of Gandhi, Dr. King, and Abdul Ghaffar Khan, clearly demonstrate the power of "truth and love" carried out in organized nonviolence. Organizing and implementing their aims began small, initially focusing on educating APV members and the Bamiyan community about principles and practices of nonviolence. One of the group’s first activities was construction of Bamiyan Peace Park—a green space adorned with signs that ask the community "Why not love?" and "Why not peace?" Atop a brick wall at the entrance, sits a small statue of a dove with the message: "Even a little of our love is stronger than the wars of the world."

Building on their early efforts, the APV initiated several other projects. They began experimenting with inter-ethnic community living. They started establishing inter-ethnic activities to overcome enmities among the varying ethnic groups of Afghanistan. This demonstrated the effectiveness of nonviolent practices. Meanwhile, they organized discussions for assessing which historical strategies are most useful in Afghanistan. As a result, it became obvious that new approaches specific to the Afghan cultural context would be needed.

Over time APV expanded its outreach efforts. Establishing an office in Kabul they initiated conversations with peacemakers from around the globe. They hosted internationals including Nobel Laureate Mairead Maguire, Kathy Kelly, and Col. Ann Wright. Several peace volunteers traveled to India to study the methods and philosophy of Gandhi. To confront the pressing issue of poverty, the organization began a small-scale, duvet-making and seamstress cooperative. They networked and partnered with other Afghan groups. Arranging meetings with local and foreign officials, including the U.S. ambassador Karl Eikenberry, they asked for help in ending the war. They organized marches and protests to draw attention to their work. Symbols, primarily blue scarves chosen as reminders that everyone lives under the same blue sky, invited people to identify and connect to the APV’s work. Finally, and most importantly, the young people formed an intentional, inter-ethnic community modeled on Gandhi’s ashram. In this daily communal mode of living together, they challenge themselves as nonviolent peacemakers.

Utilizing social media to connect with an international audience and disseminate their message, the APV created 184 videos on YouTube under the profile "ourjourneytosome." The videos help connect to an international audience and disseminate their message. These videos document methods of nonviolence that the group is either inventing or adopting. They communicate informative messages, such as how the drones and the war impact ordinary Afghans. In recent months, the Afghan Peace Volunteers used Facebook to create a community of Afghan and foreign supporters from 48 countries to whom they turn to for assistance in seeking non-military solutions for Afghanistan.

The goals of this movement are very simple. The APV strive to demonstrate their desire to live without war. They aspire to achieve a self-sufficient Afghanistan. Members seek to end the internal divisions among the people of Afghanistan and to change the international perception that mistakenly views Afghans as proud, war-loving people who seek retaliation and revenge. The APV's goals are rooted in fundamental principles of nonviolence. First and foremost, the group recognizes the dignity of every human person and strives never to harm another. To this end, when confronting indignities, the APV seeks to deal with the root problems rather than attack people. Their primary method is the use of love to build relationships and community among people so no person is humiliated, while at the same time encouraging others to recognize the humanity of all persons.

Second, the Afghan Peace Volunteers understand that nonviolence is an ongoing way of life that must be practiced continuously. Each strives to refrain from physical, mental, internal, and external violence. They intentionally live together to create a peacemaking community.
Finally, the members understand that violence begets violence and that nonviolence can be transformative. It can change situations and repair harm. In keeping with the Afghan Peace Volunteers' principles, members have refrained from angry physical responses to ridicule, false accusations, threats to their lives and property, theft of their belongings, vandalism of their projects, and other hindrances to their work. Rather than retaliate, the APV reach out to adversaries in peaceful ways, challenging them to join in advocating nonviolence as a means to heal and improve Afghanistan.

In considering why this movement toward nonviolence has taken root, it is necessary to recognize that conditions are ripe for it. First, warfare and destruction of the people and their society has been widespread and constant for nearly four decades; such violence inevitably affects their social, mental, and economic well-being and erodes their sense of security. Second, the majority of those who suffer the consequences of war and violence in Afghanistan exist outside its power structures and are, thereby, the least empowered. Third, by setting and accomplishing short-term projects, for example, the building of a peace park, the APV are educating fellow Afghans to see that nonviolence can work. As a result, from a handful of individuals in Bamiyan, the project has expanded and now includes members from a variety of ethnic groups and regions. The numbers continue to grow.

Nonetheless, violent conflicts continue. The organization faces significant challenges if its efforts are to catalyze into a transformative movement. First, because of ongoing violence, the APV views it as imperative to expand the core membership and seeks to ensure that future volunteers maintain a steadfast commitment to nonviolence. (Currently, only a small cohort is totally committed; many others are involved but not committed to nonviolence.) Having such a dedicated cadre in place will deter members from compromising the movement's central principles.

Second, the years of fighting in Afghanistan deeply traumatized the population, with many people now convinced that the only response to violence is violence. The APV is celebrating its small accomplishments, while simultaneously emphasizing to people that transitioning to a peaceful society will require time, sacrifice, and struggle.

Finally, Afghan Peace Volunteers are continuing their efforts to expand the movement and to spread the word about their work. This requires that their members' continued courage be a voice for sanity and peace in a war torn country. After having made multiple visits to Afghanistan to interview APV members, conducting interviews with their international supporters, and reviewing the documents and videos that they have produced, we find it more and more apparent that this nascent group (with its unique approach and cultural context) is significant and that the world should know about it.

It is important that the Afghan Peace Volunteers can and do exist in Afghanistan. There is clearly a desire among Afghans for peaceful change. Decades of bloodshed and violence have demonstrated that force and domination will not bring peace to the people of Afghanistan. They are deepening their belief that nonviolence is the way forward. As Nobel Laureate Mairead Maguire put it, "The Afghan youth are a great inspiration to us all. In the midst of occupation, violence, and war, they have each made a choice 'not to kill another human being but to love.' This is the greatest and most important choice each human being can make in their own lives and we are grateful to the Afghan Peace Volunteers for showing us the way to peace."

RECOMMENDED READINGS