



# Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

**Sarah Chayes**

Kandahar, December 24-30, 2005

Dear Friends:

Ayisa was sitting outside in the sun with the other Arghand women late this morning, cracking almonds. The landlord doesn't like them hammering on the nuts in their workroom; he says it will cave in the foundations of the house. I doubt it. But I'm just as happy to see them outside in the sun, better integrated into the overall operation than when they're tucked away in their room on the far end of the building. And am thrilled to watch them increasingly at ease with the Arghand guys, no longer fully covering their faces in front of them, reassured by the correct, collegial, and respectful way the guys treat them.

Hammering away on the thick almond shells, Ayisa exclaimed: "We're like a person standing on two watermelons! We don't know which way to jump." It's an expression in Pashtu.

She and the other women had just gotten through telling me about the "night-letters" that appeared in several neighborhoods while I was away for a couple of days. "Take your girls out of school," the leaflets warned. And to the teachers: "Shut this school, or you are responsible for what will happen." The message is familiar. But it is the first time it has been delivered in downtown Kandahar, and with an eerie simultaneity. Sadiqa, who lives at the other end of town, said such letters had shown up in her neighborhood too; and Ma Jan, who's a Shi'a, said her community's mosque around the corner from us was also targeted. On Tuesday, a bomb went off in a girls' school on the west end of town. "The sons of dogs," said Ayisa of the "Taliban," or whoever it is delivering the threats. "They don't want their own country to have education and move forward. They don't give any time to women." A remark that has to qualify for the understatement of the year.

I had been in Herat, on Afghanistan's western border with Iran, and had just been regaling the women with a description of the drive back down – how soldiers manning at least six different checkpoints along the way were hitting up every car that passed for money. They would point a finger commandingly at the driver till he pulled his vehicle up, then stick their hand in the car window. Anything was acceptable, even a measly 5 Afghani bill, or 10 cents. But, I fear, that's how it starts. If no one calls them on it, then later they start demanding more. And then they start hurting people who don't pay up. That's how it was during what people here call the "Mujahideen Nights," or the fantastically bloody civil war that followed on the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989.

I said to Ayisa: "It's great. During the Mujahideen Nights soldiers took money at chains, and during the Taliban time, girls couldn't go to school. Now we've got the worst of both worlds!"

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“Yes,” she replied. “We’re like someone balancing on two watermelons...”

What she meant is that the whole population of southern Afghanistan is precariously caught between the runaway corruption and predatory behavior of the current government, and the increasing insolence of the Taliban.

The conviction that the Americans are working with the Taliban continues to gain ground. Even in Herat, an engineer implementing USAID-funded infrastructure projects proclaimed this to be the case, explaining pedantically why it had to be true. The other day, a friend of mine, also well-educated and who should know better, insisted likewise. He said he had contacts with some Taliban, and they showed him the cards the Americans had issued them. I guffawed. “Why on earth would the Americans issue them cards, even if it were true that they were working with them? Why would the Americans be so stupid as to provide material evidence of the connection that the Taliban could show off?” But these are the stories people relay.

Herat is a beautiful city, markedly better maintained than Kandahar. It looks like a city, not a frontier outpost. And yet there’s something that bothers me about the place. A kind of...cultural abasement. There is a fabulous cathedral mosque in the middle of town; late 15th century, I think, typical Central Asian layout: huge tower-flanked pointed arches facing each other across a square courtyard, the whole covered with cavorting mosaics. The blue tile embellishing the building was the hallmark of Timurid and post-Timurid architecture in this whole region – with perhaps its apogee in Isfahan, built into a trelliswork fairy city in turquoise by the Safavi shahs of Persia, beginning in 1500.

So it turns out the mosque has a workshop, where a half a dozen old geezers, wielding hand-forged picks, broken disks from electric sanding machines, cheap rattail files that have been taken to the bazaar again and again to have new grooves cut into their worn-down surface, repair chunks of the mosaic work. Their technique – doubtless passed down for generations, and corrupted at each transition, and at each addition of “modern” glazes and tools – is a crippled shadow of the art of the medieval ceramics workers. I am ashamed to see it, but more ashamed to see the tools these old men are forced to use. This mosque is the glory of Herat, a city that reaps some \$20 million/month in customs duties, and no one has found the spare change to buy these guys some new tools?

At the glass workshop, where we are buying hand-blown bottles for Arghand bath we watched the bottles being blown (by a tight-lipped hunchback, working with a wood-fired oven, a flowerpot filled with water, a slab of marble, and a long metal blow-pipe for actually fashioning the bottles), but left Herat before they were cool and could be packed. Result, they are about 2/3 the quality of the original samples, there were half a dozen more tops than bottles, and such. It’s



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again...PTSD. Make whatever profit you can right now, and to heck with the ongoing relationship and whatever future business it might bring. It will obviously take continued effort to...do the right thing: provide a market for another Afghan craft.

Electricity has been a major problem of late. It only exists 24 hrs. out of every 48 (at least it's on a schedule now, so we can plan for its presence and absence!), and twice in the past three weeks or so, the underground cable has shorted out. This is not the kind of place where you can call the electric company and have them come and repair their infrastructure. Nurallah and Karim and Abd al-Ahad spent most of the day the first time with our newly purchased pick and shovel digging up the shorted cable, then when the electricity guy told them to call him back in a few days and he might do something about it, Abd al-Ahad fixed it himself. Our water comes from a well with an electric-powered submersible pump, and the tank kept going dry through this saga. So, though the cable is fixed and we now have a direct telephone line to the Head of Electricity...I broke down and made a major purchase for Arghand: a solar-powered water pump. With shipping, the thing is going to cost about \$1,500, plus the panels, which will be about \$800 plus shipping. This thus counts as a BIG TICKET ITEM. Still, to have water – and to be able to charge batteries whenever the pump isn't in use – is such an exciting prospect that I decided (in consultation with the Arghand gang, of course) that it was a worthwhile investment. [To witness the installation, please see Photo Archives]

But of course it whetted my appetite. Arghand is in the process of launching its first direct crop substitution program. Next week, we are going to contract with 10 members of the district council in Panjwayi, just northwest of here, to grow about ½ acre of roses each. This is so exciting...the very first step in making roses bloom in place of poppies!! We're providing rose plants, tractor time to plough, labor to plant, and fertilizer; and we're promising to buy the resulting roses for the next five years. To me, this is the only way to begin supplanting opium: to offer people a risk-free alternative. Or at least a risk-free start. Abd al-Ahad and Nurallah both have land, and in keeping with our principle of launching our projects first within Arghand membership, we are giving the same terms to both of them to grow roses. But...what I'd really like to do for them is to throw in a solar pump and a drip irrigation system for the plantation. Both of their families are just getting by, and I know the main problem is having to buy diesel fuel for the water-pumps they use to irrigate their fields. What a life-saving difference it would be for them to be able to get the same amount of water without having to pay for fuel! So two more solar pumps and panels are now at the top of the Arghand wish list, next in line being two large essential oil stills, since our 33 liter one is going to be way too small to handle a decent quantity of roses, and we want to keep the roses and the (very pungent) Artemisia Cina and other wild herbs separate, and then an electric-powered seed oil press, so we can actually make enough oil to finally get beyond soap to bath oils.

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And on it goes, this odd dichotomy of wildly exciting Arghand developments against a very ominous backdrop.

I wish every one of you an extremely successful, exciting, challenging and rewarding new year.

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