

A Return to

Afgh

Phil and Julie Sparrow were TEAR Australia fieldworkers in northern Afghanistan until the International Assistance Mission and other development organisations were expelled from the country late last year. Phil returned to Afghanistan in December. He describes what he saw, and the painful questions it raises for him.

*(Photographs:
Phil and Julie Sparrow)*

afghanistan

In the last weeks of 2001 I returned to Afghanistan for a short time. When Julie and I left, in chaos and grief in September, we thought it would be months, maybe years before we returned. The events that followed September 11 have left many, including us, reeling, trying to follow the changes, make decisions, think cogently and even prayerfully about what was going on in a country we called our home.

Suffice to say that by November, TEAR considered Afghanistan and Pakistan both safe enough, and the need severe enough, to send me back to assist with the new Disaster Management Program that the IAM was setting up. While I was initially to help the Program Manager, family circumstances required him to return home and I was left in charge.

In early December, I was part of the reconnaissance team that flew back into Afghanistan to assess the losses to our workplaces and homes, meet with our staff and the new Government, and try to work out the way forward. Work-wise, we achieved a good deal. I was able to travel by road to Mazar-i-Sharif with the Acting Director. The trip took a whole day, including a 3-hour hike through the snow-bound and largely destroyed Salang Tunnel.

Once in Mazar, I was able to meet with all our local staff, visit our homes and office, meet several government officials and some of the other aid agencies in town. I even had a quick chance to walk through the second-hand bazaar, to see if any of our looted



belongings were on sale.

After two days we returned to Kabul, again by road. A shorter trip this time, 11 hours instead of 13 — but more exciting, we were shot at on the way. The bullet struck the car door where I was sitting, and some zealous soldier dynamited the Salang tunnel as we came back through. Men were working to clear it. Our fear was that more of the tunnel would cave in around us. It didn't.

After another day in Kabul and more meetings, I flew back out to Peshawar, completed another week's work, and returned home.

Professionally, it was a useful trip. Personally — how do I start to describe it? On my first night back in Kabul after the long and frightening trip back from Mazar, I lay in bed and cried and cried. Through my tears, I swore at God. It's too hard to record here in detail what I felt and said, but I know God heard what was spoken as well as what was unspoken.

Being back in Mazar-i-Sharif had been enormously hard. I had walked through our old home — there was not even a toothpick

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left. They are committed looters in Mazar, and the only thing they didn't take was the paint off the walls. I think I had secretly been hoping that I would find something — anything — some evidence, a reminder of our life there. Nothing. A similar sight



greeted us when we visited the former homes of other teammates. In one, just a single kid's mobile was left hanging from the ceiling. In another, a few trunks of clothes and books. In another, the pet dog was still alive and being fed by the landlord.

What hurt really badly was the fact that I didn't get to see our old chaokidar. As I travelled to Mazar, I had asked God for two things. One, was to recover some little thing from our home. The other was to see Ismael.

Back in August 2001 when Julie and I had said farewell to Ismael, we expected to be back in a month. We were only leaving for a short holiday, or so we thought. I had asked him if he would like us to bring him something back from Pakistan.

'Faqat jan-e joretan', he replied. 'Only yourselves, safely'. He was more than a watchman, he was our family in Mazar, an uncle to our daughter, a brother to me, a friend to Julie. Even as I write, tears prick my eyes. Why did God allow all this terrible loss and waste and disappointment to happen? And why let me get all the way back to Mazar only to not see the one person I really wanted to see?

And our work – there is not much left to show for nearly 10 years. Six out of seven foreign staff working in our Community Development Project (CDP), and a sister project like it, had to leave before the completion of their terms, due to conflict. Several

work sites had been shut down. Others have ended early. Why, God?

As I sat with our remaining project staff and discussed the future of the CDP, post-Taliban, I had few reassurances for them. While the picture is not so bleak as it was just following September 11, it is still bleak. Looting and conflict have meant the loss of thousands of dollars of equipment. Trained staff have fled to safer places, taking with them their skills and experience. Yet again we would be starting from scratch.

This is a deeply depressing and upsetting story for me. Even as I write it, I find myself wondering, 'why should such a story of failure be repeated, be printed?' Clearly, much development work around the world tells a very different story. But this story does show some of the more difficult, less successful aspects to working in high-stress, low-security locations. These aspects are also part of the 'whole story'; they are part of the TEAR Australia story, and they are certainly part of the Afghan story.

It is true to say that our projects and presence have done much good. We remember the good work that village people themselves began, after months of awareness-raising and training. We recall the good infrastructure we assisted with and the difference it made – the clean wells, the water pumps – and the eagerness with which many boys and girls, men and women

embraced new learning, literacy and schooling. We know that the staff we trained were committed and skilled, and we have hope that they will continue to build up their country. We do know that the seeds of independent thought that we sought to sow will take root in some minds and hearts. These things, war and conflict cannot totally remove. And I hope that the relationships we built, the friends we made will endure distance and time.

But I am still asking, 'Has it been worth it? Has the investment made by TEAR Australia, ourselves, those who went before us, and the many Afghan staff, weighed up against the losses, the failures, the destruction, the glacially slow progress, the hurt? Would we have been better doing something else entirely?' And are these even right questions? I don't know. Should we ask for reasons of God? Some books I have been reading in recent months suggest these are the questions of an immature faith. Perhaps so. Some people who have talked to me have suggested God allows these things, even brings these things for our spiritual growth. This notion is especially hard to take.

Reading Habbakuk and Lamentations over the last weeks I have found my own answer of sorts, not very satisfactory, but it will do me for now:

God sometimes does invest in things that don't appear worth it. It makes no sense and the only obvious outcomes are loss, failure, hurt and disappointment. But he asks us to do it anyway.

TEAR has recently sent two fieldworkers to assist in Afghan relief programs. Deborah Storie, a TEAR Board member and former TEAR fieldworker in Afghanistan, will work for 4 months with the International Assistance Mission in Kabul coordinating the restart of IAM projects. Jim Stuart is managing relief efforts with a Tearfund (UK) team in a refugee camp in Quetta, on the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan.