

A Human Touch in Afghanistan

– A Humanitarian Relief Mission by Singapore Inc

By Dr Wong Mun Yew

It is almost a year's anniversary to the Singapore Afghan Refugee humanitarian relief mission, but for the more than 50 brave and kind souls, who volunteered their time and effort for the suffering Afghan people, the experience and memories would remain imprinted in their minds forever. I was one of the fortunate few who was given the opportunity to participate in the first ever Singapore Incorporated civilian medical mission, spearheaded by the Singapore International Foundation, to a country devastated by an ongoing war, drought and famine. Singapore sent a total of 5 medical relief teams, over a period of 2½ months from March till May this year, each lasting approximately 2 weeks. And the immense experience gained has certainly changed my view and perception towards life.

Destiny is not a matter of chance, it is a matter of choice; it is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved. – William Jennings Bryan

One thing that gripped me most is the tenacity and resilience of the Afghan people, their will and grit to live in such adversity. Afghanistan is torn apart by 23 years of ongoing wars, from the time of the Soviet invasion in 1979 to the current one precipitated by the September 11 incident. Coupled with the harsh and arid environment of the Central Asia desert plains, compounded by the ongoing drought of 2 years, plus the recent 10-year control by the Taleban, who led the country into regression in its fervent pursuit of a pure and strict Islamic rule, Afghanistan has "advanced" to be one of the world's poorest nation.

Yet her people have remained resilient, with religion strongly intertwining with every fabric of life and society. In their eyes, though mostly filled with sadness,

is the determination to re-create and rebuild a nation.

Food can feed a nation, but education determines its future.

I will always remember the children there: though gripped by grim statistics like 1 in 4 will not live beyond the age of 5, and a significant proportion of the remainder maimed by landmines and bombs, they still exude the innocence found in children everywhere in the world. I saw them kicking a ball, playing "catching", and even flying kites. They exhibited the usual happiness and laughter, living without any care in the world, in a barren land of nothing.

One stark contrast is that in their presence, were some children without limbs, joining in wholeheartedly with rudimentary walking sticks. When we arrived for a visit at a refugee camp, they surrounded us with large, friendly and inquisitive eyes, pointing at us excitedly.

An estimate by Unicef puts the overall percentage of children attending school at 70%, and much lower for girls. The numbers dwindle drastically in the rural parts of the country. A large number would be working, selling food and wares in the hot and sandy environment, or sitting on a donkey cart transporting goods. They are the future of Afghanistan, thus education is as important as immediate aid.

A leader knows the way, shows the way, and goes the way.

As the date for the first mission approached on 10 March, I watched with growing worry as the Americans launched Operation Anaconda to flush out the remnant elements of Al-Qaeda and Taleban forces in the Paktia/Gandez region, 400 km away from the area we were volunteering to help. Spin Boldak is a border town in the south-east of



Singapore medical team in action... in emergency room.

the country, and there are 5 large refugee camps in the area with an estimate of more than 50,000 people.

To compound the problem, India-Pakistan relations were at a low then, with a war threatening to blow up over the Kashmiri issue. Thus volunteers of an Indian descent were discouraged to participate. The media attention on the ongoing conflict certainly did not help one bit.

So more than a week prior to departure, I was the only doctor and team leader of Singapore's first medical mission to Afghanistan. The significance of being in the first team, the only doctor and, not to mention, leader, hit me like a sledgehammer.

Not only must the team achieve the mission objective of providing medical aid to the refugees, it must also liaise with our host organisation and work with the rest of the non-governmental organisations on the ground. There were aid workers from Pakistan (Pakistan Islamic Medical Association, our host), Malaysia, Turkey, United Kingdom, not to mention UNHCR and the World Food Programme, hence the potential political minefield in the course of our work.

The first team also had to set working protocols and the tone of work for the rest of the teams, as there would be specialists in various fields lending a hand later.

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Lastly, the team's safety was my responsibility. I actually contemplated withdrawing from the first team to join the second (with more doctors), as I had never handled a task of such gigantic proportion.

Challenges are what make life interesting; overcoming them is what makes life meaningful. – Joshua J Marie

I hunted furiously in the last week for at least another doctor to join me, but to no avail. I guess most of us had schedules booked 2 weeks in advance.

I knew deep down that backing out was out of the question as I had given my word and the media hype about the mission had rendered any delay in sending the first team out impossible. And the first team would be a facade should it arrive at Afghanistan without a doctor. So with feelings of apprehension and fear of the enormous task ahead and danger involved, blended with a sense of adventure and a chance to challenge myself, I boarded the plane.

And as the facts went, we achieved most of the mission objectives, showed other nations the caring side of Singapore, came home safely, and opened the eyes of Singaporeans here to the humanitarian disaster in Afghanistan.

All roads lead north to Kandahar.

Kandahar is the second largest city in Afghanistan and the first to be bombed in the American war on terrorism against Osama bin Laden. My team had the privilege of paying this historic city a visit to assess whether medical aid from Singapore could be extended to this war-ravaged city, keeping in mind the security issue.

The 5-hour road drive north from Spin Boldak to the city through the dry barren desert was an unforgettable one. The vast expanse of sand, interspersed periodically with dried riverbeds, plus the intermittent sandstorms, aggravated by the clouds of sand dust kicked by vehicles, all contributed to make the landscape a surreal one. The few bridges along the way were dotted with big holes that



Their smiles and innocent facies belie the distressing situation in the refugee camps.



Me and a healthy, bouncing gypsy baby at consultation, a rare sight in a place with widespread infant malnutrition.

could swallow up big trucks in one go, damaged during the wars and with no semblance of repairs. Only certain segments of the route had proper roads, otherwise it was just a multitude of sand tracks crisscrossing the desert in the general direction towards Kandahar. However, every driver knew the importance of only driving on established tracks, for Afghanistan was one of the most landmined countries in the world.

The only pit-stop along the way consisted of about 10 containers of shops, selling your usual chilled Coca-cola and potato-chips, and usual sundries you would find in a corner mama-store in Singapore. Yes, the locals call them the container economy. Discarded containers, some still with the logos like Cosco and Maersk, barely visible on the peeling paint, were used for shops and living quarters. Carcasses of destroyed military trucks and tanks, and occasional outposts with soldiers and machine-guns, dotted the route

north, acting as a grim reminder of the ongoing war.

One of the most heart-wrenching sights was in the middle of the road-journey, along a 3-kilometre stretch, where individual children, numbering about 40, some as young as 7-8 years old, were kneeling along these vehicular sand tracks, placing their hands together, begging for money and food. They would be interspersed about 50 metres apart, exposing themselves to the hot 42.C sun and the sand and dust kicked up by vehicles driving past them. Some of them would stand up and run towards a vehicle in anticipation should one slow down, but they usually came away empty-handed. There were no villages around, so where did the children come from? Did they come from villages far off? Were they part of an established network? Did they ever eat lunch? What about water and heat-stroke?

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A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. – Confucius

I still remember the monumental beauty of the desert, even though it was a short 5-hour ride. The barren and shattered landscape, with minimal sign of human interference, waves of sand dunes as far as the eye can see and empty mountains that stared mockingly in the distance. In this vast amphitheatre of nature, it invoked an overwhelming sense of peace. I spent half my time looking out into nothingness and reflecting on my life. As there was nothing around to clutter or distract the mind, it was easy to think with a clarity that would be impossible in the hectic lives we have at home in Singapore. After all, the world has become a much smaller place with the advancement of technology, internet and communications. But here, with no electricity and network, the mind can be free again.

The sights, sound and smell of Kandahar city resemble what one would find in towns of Pakistan or Tibet – brown, dry, dusty and flat. Bullock carts and bicycles jostle with the latest shiny Toyota landcruisers on the roads. Economy is thriving, with people displaying and selling wares on the ground like fruits and shoes in an open market area, and shops selling raw meat, cameras 1 or 2 years out of date and the latest types of film. The fact that China has become an economic powerhouse was evident here, with many “Made in China” items, from computers to room heaters. Afghanistan actually shared a border with China.

The big contrast here was the presence of many armed Northern Alliance soldiers, now given the task of keeping law and order, and evidence of its war-ravaged past-rubble of almost destroyed buildings beside a shop or

home. White UNHCR vehicles weaving in traffic serve further to remind us of the plight of the Afghan people.

No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted. – Aesop

If you stand in the middle of a refugee camp, there would be rows after rows of neatly arranged 4 x 4 metre tents, stretching out towards the horizon far away, into the edge of the camp barely visible. The largest camp had more than 1,200 families. The 5 camps at Spin Boldak area started its existence after September 11, when the fleeing refugees were stuck after Pakistan closed her borders. Each camp was managed by a group of aid agencies. The sudden arrival of more than 50,000 people overwhelmed the local resources, especially food and water. The cold winter around December and January certainly exacerbated the conditions.

Life there was harsh, with overcrowding, the lack of food, potable water and sanitation, not to mention exposure to elements like sandstorms, the hot 40-50.C sun and the cold nights. It was no wonder plenty of patients had gastrointestinal and respiratory diseases, skin infections and infestations. A small cut on a limb can be a limb-losing sentence. Malnutrition was another problem with too little food and too many mouths to feed in a big family. We did the best we could, with limited medical resources and medications. The short duration of the entire Singapore effort was probably insufficient to make a huge impact there, but we have touched the lives of each and every individual patient treated. We demonstrated that Singapore is a nation that cares.

“I expect to pass through the world but once. Any good there fore that

I can do, or any kindness that I can show my fellow, let me do it now. Let me not defer it or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.” – Stephen Grellet

I was asked many times, “Why do it? Aren’t there plenty of dangers involved?” Why not? Being able to use your knowledge and skills to help a fellow human being in need, isn’t that motivation enough? Was it a dangerous place? Well, Afghanistan is a country in the process of rebuilding, with common law and order almost non-existent in the border areas, I would be wrong to say that there is little or no danger and no risk involved. Just use common sense, do not take unnecessary risks and certainly, no hero tactics. The Afghan people are nice, and the area generally safe, and (with God’s grace) nothing untoward happened to any team member over there.

A few things I have learned, besides realising my strengths and weaknesses and widening my perspective of life, are lessons only learned on the field: where medical diagnostic procedures and treatment choices are limited, and medication is sometimes used not only for therapy, but for diagnosis as well, an area where the patient’s history and the physician’s 5 senses elicit a diagnosis, without the aid of sophisticated machinery. Therapy is often hampered by the patient’s lack of basic medical and health knowledge, lack of access to basic medical care and poverty. How can you tell a man with diabetes mellitus the possible complications and need for daily medicine when he has an invalid father, wife and 8 children to feed at home, and is dependent on handouts? Here, “do no harm” is more important than “do something good”.

Now, would I do it again? Yes, without a doubt. ■