

An Afghan solution to an Afghan problem

by Capt. Ashley P.W. Norris

Poor. These refugees were literally dirt-floor poor. Their living rooms are outside and shaded by sheets and canvas. They laid out carpets and blankets to keep down the dust. They built their homes themselves out of mud and hay, using fabric, wood and metal scraps for roofs. All of this is mild protection from the baking sun and blowing dust.

The smell of ammonia and manure was overwhelming. A few skinny chickens and roosters wandered around, pecking at the trash littering the ground. Yards away were dozens of sheep, goats and cows that belonged to their neighbors, a migrant Kuchi family. Their living conditions were worse; they live under the same tents as the animals. However, they were better-off since they have animals and can sustain themselves. All the home areas had waist-high piles of manure outside the entrances. They'll burn them in the winter to keep warm.

On July 28 I went out with 15 Afghan Civil Order Policemen, three American Soldiers, an Air Force photojournalist and a civilian videographer to document the police visit to an Afghan refugee camp. The police go out to places like this to find out how the refugees are doing, get atmospheric, let them know they are there to help and hand out some humanitarian assistance.

Children ran around with dirty faces, clothes and unbrushed hair. Some had infections from untreated cuts. One young girl couldn't walk; her feet were twisted in unnatural directions. Her mother told us that the family couldn't afford medical treatment for any of them. It was incredibly distressing.

Their water came from a well with a bucket hanging over it. From above, the water had a greenish tint and I can't imagine that it was sanitary. One woman sprinkled water on the dirt between her living area and her doorway to keep the dust down. Her daughter, who can't walk, watched while her son played nearby and asked the American soldiers for candy.

Another woman sat on the ground next to her infant who was sleeping in a make-shift hammock. A toddler napped nearby with his head covered by a scarf to keep off the flies, which were also plaguing the herd of goats not ten feet away.

More than 30 members of this extended family migrated to Kabul from the Iran-Afghanistan border one year ago. They packed up their homes, left their jobs and moved to Kabul. They said it was safer in Kabul than where they were from.

Everyone was appalled by the living conditions and overwhelmed by the smells and dust. However, all of us walked through the refugee camp slowly and respectfully. After all, this was the refugees' home. These people had nothing and yet they offered us their hospitality, welcoming us into their homes, and offering us chai tea.

I put my hand over my heart and said hello, Salaam, to the women as I walked through their homes. They stared and smiled at me, the only woman in the group. Some of the younger girls tried to shake my hand; it was endearing.

The policemen went to the camp to check on the families, to let them know they care and show them who they can contact them for help if they have any problems. It is a small thing, but big challenges sometimes require small solutions.

These refugees will hopefully remember the Afghan police as a good, friendly force, there to help and protect them. As the police continue to do this across Afghanistan, the perception of the Afghan police will hopefully start to change, and with that, the perception of the Afghan government.

After visiting with the families for nearly two hours, the ANCOP Mullah--a Muslim spiritual leader--spoke and prayed with them. The policemen and refugee families prayed together, which is very important. Praying, in Muslim culture, brings people together.

After prayer, the police brought out several boxes of children's clothes that had been donated by the Unilever Adopt-A-Soldier Platoon group in New Jersey. The children were excited and immediately put on their new clothes and shoes. One young boy excitedly ran off with a pair of galoshes, pants and new shirt to show his mother.

These people are like poor people everywhere in the world. They have nothing. They live from hand-to-mouth and they want a better life for their children. The difference is that these children will probably never learn to read or write and were born into extreme poverty in a country without social systems to help them.

Visiting this refugee camp was an eye-opening and heartbreaking experience. I was one of the five American military members on this visit and I will never forget it. It made me thankful that I was born into a middle-class family in the United States. I never worried about where my next meal was coming from or if I would get to go to school to learn to read and write. All that was just assumed.

I know many people don't care about Afghans or Afghanistan. They think that what the military is doing over here isn't making a dent. I disagree, I have walked through their slum, I have seen

the Afghan police, which our military helped train, provide some hope and assistance to these families. They showed them that the police are there to help and protect them.

In the police's small way, I personally believe they are slowly improving Afghanistan. It is a slow and personal process that will take time. It is an Afghan solution to an Afghan problem and that is what is needed right now. As time goes on, hopefully Afghans will begin to trust their police and government and bring peace to this war-torn land.