

When America's Longest War Ends, Will Peace Be Possible?

by Steve Clemens

Returning from Afghanistan, Steve Clemens brings a message from the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers, "We cannot remain silent to our conscience in firmly disagreeing with the current Afghan government/Taliban/U.S./NATO militarized approach to our country's problems."



Young women plant fruit trees in a Kabul schoolyard renamed "Friendship Garden." The tree planting is a project of Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers. Photo by author.

Having just returned from an international peace delegation trip to Afghanistan, I have a particular fascination in the renewed public debate about the war in the aftermath of the extra-judicial assassination of Osama bin Laden. Some anti-war proponents are quick to point out public opinion polls that indicate that a majority of Americans no longer support what was previously considered "the Good War." However, I don't think our nation's foreign policy should be predicated primarily on public opinion because it has so often been readily manipulated by the corporate owners of much of the media—and can change again overnight if another terrorist event strikes on U.S. soil.

Instead, we need to ask what is in the best interest of the Afghan people? Is the aim of the U.S. really an operation of "enduring freedom," the grandiose epithet President Bush gave to his act of war in response to the 9/11 tragedy? Is the present war, now approaching its 10th anniversary, really about providing the kind of "freedom" Afghans want?

The International Peace Delegation, led and coordinated by Kathy Kelly and Voices for Creative Nonviolence, met with the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers (AYPV), young people from the Bamiyan Province. They were mentored by Hakim, a medical

doctor from Singapore who is steeped in Gandhian nonviolent strategy. He had accompanied the Afghan refugees from their camps in Pakistan back to their home province several years ago and has employed various strategies to work for peace and reconciliation amidst the war-torn survivors.

One attempt, leading a semester-long workshop for 65 college students ended with the students reluctantly concluding that “peace is not possible” in Afghanistan. This was primarily because they felt the decades-long tensions among the various ethnic and religious divisions were too prevalent. Hakim’s next strategy was to invite students to live together for a semester, blending the ethnic and religious diversity in an attempt to build community. After some struggles and challenges, both within and without, Hakim decided to begin that reconciliation process with even younger people, asking tribal elders and tribal youth councils for young people he could mentor and educate. They suggested the young people, both boys and girls, young men and women, who then worked together to build a Peace Park in Bamiyan, in the Central Highlands of Afghanistan, about 100 miles from Kabul —an area known for its great scenic beauty, as well as the seventh century stone Buddahs which the Taliban destroyed in 2001. The youth conducted several “International Day of Listening” events over cellphone and internet connections using Skype technology, and marched nonviolently in the streets of Kabul pleading for an end to the war, the occupation, the violence. They met with U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry, a retired Lt. General who had commanded U.S. forces in this war, and handed him a letter, asking him to pass it on to our president.

In their letter to President Obama the AYPVs wrote:

We are tired of war and we share with brothers and sisters everywhere a common aspiration to live in peace. We face great problems indeed but we also have courage because the magnificent Afghan outdoors surrounds us and we have within us an even greater desire for creative, non-violent solutions. We cannot remain silent to our conscience in firmly disagreeing with the current Afghan government/Taliban/US/NATO militarized approach to our country’s problems...



Afghan Youth Peace volunteers (from the left) Mohammed, Abdulai and Steve plant one of 55 fruit trees, symbolizing growing peace, instead of war.

We desire reconciliation. It's time to struggle for a reconciliation of civil hearts instead of fueling a clash or confrontation of civilizations. We wish to converse as equal, fellow human beings, without the need for guns and bombs. We desire to patiently build our nation. So, while we appreciate your friendship and partnership, we desire just as much to trek on our own paths, build our own parks and choose which of our own mountains to climb. We desire the dignity of working with our own hands and walking with our own legs. We ask for assistance that builds factories, industries, roads and an economy that would help us to stand on our own. We desire justice and truth. So, we ask for your support in denying space to corruption, fraud, lies and deceptions and in quenching the abusive greed for power and money that are destroying our society and humanity as much as violence and war are...

So please, we ask that the world shifts her engagement with our sovereign country to a civilian approach. We should have as many civil forums, as many civil negotiations, as many civil discussions and as many civil occasions for relationship-building as are imaginatively possible. We believe that these civil efforts cannot be accomplished through either our local military or any foreign military because humankind cannot build relations with weapons...

We desire the security that other peaceful nations have. The Taliban had wreaked havoc in this valley too. And killed many of us. Our people fled from them across this very Hindu Kush mountain range. We do not accept their violent actions just as we do not accept the violent solutions the world has been counting on. We have become a terror to one another, in our inconsiderate actions and in our cowardly silence, and this must stop.

We hope to continue the 10 years of security in Bamiyan by refusing violence and by refusing to take revenge. And we wish to refuse the “insurgents any further excuse to hurt us because of a foreign presence; brothers killing brothers, friends killing friends, humans killing one another.

Thus, while we understand the US/NATO coalition’s concern with security, we desire just as much that they would leave us... and leave us soon. We want all violence and fighting to end. We want the Taliban, all Afghan warlords including the many warlords holding power in our present government, all regional powerbrokers, and the US/NATO forces to cease their operations, and to be brought to account for the killings they each are responsible for. We need to travel this history and this future on our own.

Humanity has taken too long and lost too many in failing to implement non-violent, civil ways to resolve human conflict. We human beings can do better than repeatedly resorting to force and war to address human hurts and needs. Stop the killings, stop killing one another, stop killing the people. Stop killing us. (conclusion)

Toward the end of May, to my knowledge, Ambassador Eikenberry has not responded.

The “freedom” that these Afghans told us they want is what most of us want: freedom from a foreign military occupation coupled with the resources to rebuild their society in such a way as to embrace diversity while respecting common humanity and finding nonviolent methods to resolve conflict. It is my opinion, as well as the rules of the international community, that our nation must pay reparations for the rebuilding of the destroyed infrastructure—but that must happen at the direction and control of Afghans rather than as another colonial or imperial project. We all want freedom from fear; continued war and occupation only breed more of it.

For the sake of my new Afghan friends, for the sake of our own nation and its imperiled democracy, for the sake of the world at large, END THIS WAR! For more information about the AYPV, see: www.ourjourneytosmile.com



Young Afghans, united in an inter-ethnic group, march to the United Nations embassy in Kabul. Their banners say: "The Citizens of Afghanistan say NO to war."

Steve Clemens is a member of WAMM and a peace and justice activist in the Twin Cities. He traveled to Afghanistan as part of an International Peace Delegation led by Voices for Creative Nonviolence from March 18-25, 2011. He serves on the boards of the Iraqi & American Reconciliation Project and Pax Christi, Twin Cities area. He is a member of the Community of St. Martin and the Alliant ACTION vigil group. He has written more extensively on his trip to Afghanistan on his blog: www.mennonista.blogspot.com