

Scouting in Afghanistan

Part Two

by David Ross



Editor's note: Canadian Scouter David Ross recently returned from a 13-month stay in Afghanistan, where he served as a Lt. Colonel Military Liaison Officer with Operation ACCIUS, the Canadian Forces contribution to UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan). During this time he was the only "in-country" foreigner working with the national office of the Afghanistan Scout Association. In two parts, he shares with us his report on this fascinating region and the challenges that face Scouting.

Meetings

Afghan Scouts do not have troop meetings as held in other countries. Formal meetings are usually held to pass information (this is sometimes referred to as "training"). The discussion is generally one-way, with the leader standing at the front of the room and talking. Meetings have no ceremony, no games, no Scout skills instruction and most of all, no fun.

Fun and Excitement

The existing Scout program does not include fun and games; however, Scouts in the northeast are beginning to meet to play football (soccer). Other groups sing or play instruments, but not in a Scouting context. The songs are mostly solo efforts and the lyrics written as a poem. Singalongs do not exist.

Games are proving difficult to introduce, as leaders are sometimes unable to understand the context in which these activities are to be used.

Consequently, they do not understand and thus do not support the endeavour. Scouting, they believe, should be first and foremost a civic-oriented (or education-oriented) organization with little time for play. It appears the introduction of fun and games will be a time-consuming process, although there is no doubt their addition will add much to a program that is currently altogether too serious.

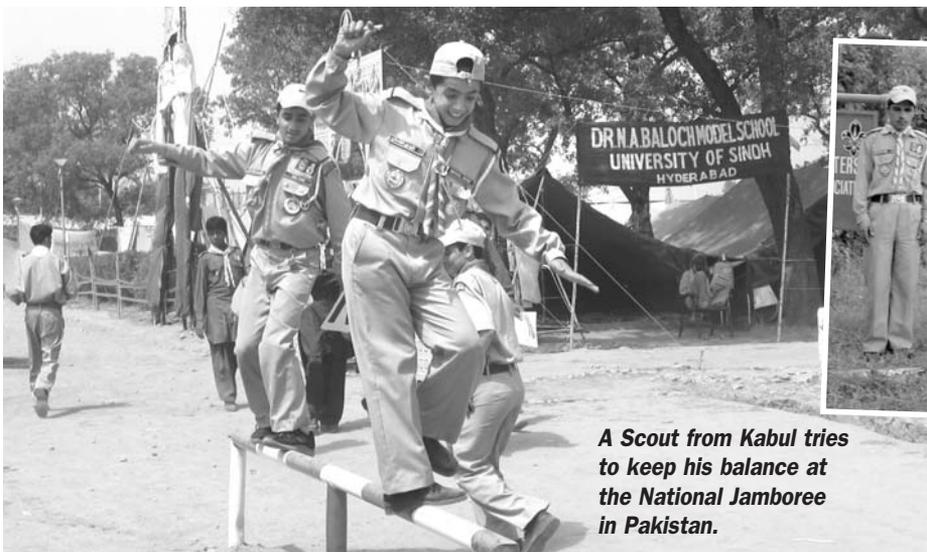
Camping

There is no camping at present. Although the concept appears to be viewed with interest by those Scouts who have heard about it from older leaders, there is little opportunity to put camping ideas into practice. There are no Scout camps and few national or provincial parks.

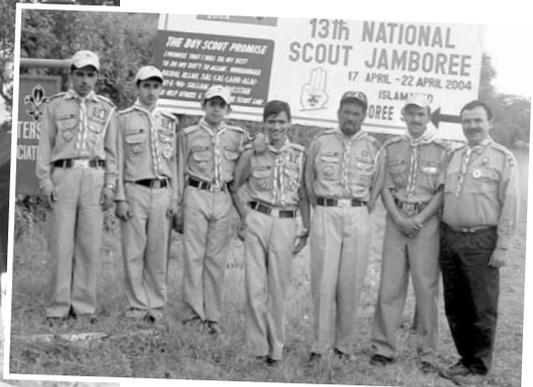
International Events

In 2004, Afghan Scouts attended their first international Scouting event in 25 years. Fortunately, Asia-Pacific

All photos courtesy David Ross



▲ A Scout from Kabul tries to keep his balance at the National Jamboree in Pakistan.



▲ The six Afghan Scouts who attended the National Jamboree in April 2004 were the first Scouts to travel outside Afghanistan in 25 years.

Region was able to secure, the same week, an invitation for male Scouts to attend the mid-April National Pakistan Jamboree in Islamabad. Defying all expectations, the Afghan Scouts departed Kabul for their 24 hour drive to Islamabad.

On arrival at the Pakistan Jamboree they were exceptionally well received. The Pakistan Scout Association went out of its way to promote Afghan Scout attendance and media interviews had been arranged. The Afghan Scouts, in their newly tailored uniforms, were treated like celebrities by the Pakistani Scouts and a significant portion of each morning was given over to posing for photographs.

The Afghans were able to experience, in a Jamboree setting, many aspects of Pakistani Scouting. First and foremost was camping. Although the Afghans and a small Sri Lankan contingent were housed indoors, the remainder of the Jamboree participants camped in tents. The Afghans were able to see how well-organized groups set up a campsite.

Next was the colour. Pakistan is a very decorative society and each campsite was ablaze with colour – banners, gates, signs, and even sawdust artwork on the ground. Also seen were the variations in the Pakistani uniform. Although the Pakistan Boy Scout Association entertains two distinct uniforms, there are several types of hats, each depending on the region.

The idea of external sponsorship was introduced. The Ministry of Education sponsors Afghan Scouting. Pakistan mirrors this model with most schools containing a Scout group; however, two organizations, Pakistan International Airlines and the Pakistan Railroad Association, also act as sponsors. Seeing Scouting outside the schools was good, as it might give the Afghans an idea to pursue a similar idea with some groups being sponsored by government-run industry.

Badges and insignia were studiously examined. The Sri Lankan Scouts have an extensive proficiency badge system, something that the Afghans had never considered. The Pakistani Scouts had beautifully designed and manufactured insignia. The presence of an on-site Scout shop allowed the Afghan Scouts to explore brass belt buckle manufacture. Possible design assistance and financial support for this endeavour were discussed with the Pakistan Scout Association.

Most of all it was the fun and games that attracted their attention.

The Jamboree featured a well-run obstacle course and many skills sessions on chair weaving, poster drawing and silk screening. The Afghans had a chance to visit the national sports centre for a swim in the Olympic-sized pool and it was determined two of the Scouts had never splashed in anything other than an irrigation ditch. The Jamboree was also filled with music and there were many Jamboree sites given over to singing, poetry and “diorama” (play) competitions.



Afghan Scouting Badge

Every evening the main sports field was filled with a musical activity. One night the Afghans dressed in traditional clothing and participated in the cultural competition, belting out an Afghan tune to the enthusiastic encouragement of the audience. Even more touching was the fact they were joined on stage by several dozen Scouts who had been born in Afghanistan but had fled to Pakistan as refugees. With arms linked the song increased in volume as it decreased in tonality. Smiles were the order of the day. All in all the Afghans were surprised and delighted these fun events could be considered part of Scouting and there was no doubt they returned to Kabul with new ideas.

The ministry never did provide the \$300 USD for travel. Once the Jamboree was over there seemed to be more pressing requirements for the money. The Scouts ended up paying the travel costs from their own pockets.

Jamborees are always fun for participants but the significance for Afghan Scouts is even greater. Afghanistan's lack of contact with the world has insulated it from new ideas and attending an international event is a true eye

opener for Afghan Scouts. It is hoped they will be invited to many events in the future.

Disabled Scouting

One of the most significant discoveries made at the Pakistan Jamboree was that disabled individuals could be Scouts. This thought had never occurred to the Afghans. After all, Scouting is a service organization. How could a disabled person work in the school? Besides, how could a one-legged or wheelchair-bound Scout march in a parade? It is interesting to note this comment was once heard while the author watched Afghan Scouts sort and collate a huge stack of membership forms. It never occurred to the Afghan Scouts this activity could be done by a non-mobile person.

At the Pakistan Jamboree there were several groups of “special Scouts”. These Scouts would band together so the one-legged Scout supplied the eyes of the blind Scout. One wheelchair Scout was an active participant in a musical group that supplied much of the Jamboree's music.

A group of blind Scouts visited the Afghans late in the Jamboree for a chat. While there they commented on the wonderful smell of the cologne the Afghans had applied to their uniforms to disguise the fact the shirts had not been washed for a couple of days. There was no trace of smell for the “regular Scouts” but the special Scouts had homed in on it immediately. The Afghans were dumbfounded.

One final experience is worth noting. During a Jamboree competition a blind Scout was led to a microphone to sing. His voice was so clear and haunting all conversation in the judging tent ceased. When he finished there was a second of silence before everyone erupted in cheers. The point of this boy's value to Scouting could not have been better made.

Afghan Scouting is growing quickly. Even more, it is beginning to demonstrate nascent organization. Just like Scouting's start 98 years ago, Afghanistan Scouting is being driven by a groundswell of interest among the youth. With its almost exclusive emphasis on civic duty it may not reflect Scouting found elsewhere, but it certainly fills a need. It is hoped the program will expand to include the other aspects of Scouting incorporated around the world. X

– David Ross Scouts in Ottawa, ON. He has been awarded the Silver Acorn for his work in Afghanistan.