

Scouting in



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.

A Resurgence of Scouting

Available sources indicate Afghan Scouting was officially founded in 1931 and existed until 1947, ceasing temporarily when the government of Marshal Shah Mahmud replaced the government of Prince Hashem. It began again in 1956 and then was banned in 1978 by the Communist government. During that time the program included boys and girls and all wore a moderately Western style of uniform. Afghanistan was a member of the World Organization of the Scouting Movement (WOSM) from 1932 to 1947 and again from 1964 to 1978. Operation Enduring Freedom, which began in October 2001, signaled a change in Afghanistan's political climate.

A new government was installed by late December and the remnants of the Taliban were removed by March 2002. After a 24-year absence it was time for Scouting to surge back to life. Middle-aged men and women remembered their years in Scouting and began to re-establish groups in

All photos courtesy David Ross.

Afghanistan

Part
One

by David Ross

schools. The rebirth of Scouting in such a short time was, for many, a great surprise.

The Environment

Afghanistan is a country of competing interests. Twenty-five years of war caused overwhelming devastation and literally everything in the country required rebuilding or replacement.

In Kabul the Afghan Scouts have been allocated two rooms for a national office and one room for the Director of Scouting. There is little furniture and one telephone. Although the national office employed, at time of writing, 17 "professional teachers," few have any connection to, or interest in, the Movement. A handful of these teachers, one university student and several teenaged Scouts from Kabul high schools do the bulk of the work, which normally consists of membership registration. Indeed, the national office appears to be a popular hangout for Scouts from across the city.

What is Scouting?

Afghan Scouting, as it stands, is essentially a community service organization – a mini-police association that patrols the school hallways and mounts honour guards. The Dari word "Serendui," which is used to refer to Scouts once referred to policemen. Although some Kabul Scouts have participated in activities outside the school - assisting in crowd control, doing price checks in the bazaars, making public service announcements and organizing taxis to hospitals for injured people – these efforts are not widespread. Scouting in Afghanistan is serious business. It is a duty.

Scouting Support

The World Organization of the Scouting Movement's Asia-Pacific Region (APR) office is heading the rebirth of Scouting in Afghanistan. The Regional Director and the Director of Youth Programs are heavily involved



Shekieb, a Scout from Kabul, squeezes through a tire on the obstacle course at the National Jamboree in Pakistan.

with establishing a framework for Afghan Scouts, providing opportunities for training and travel and addressing issues such as constitution, by-laws, uniform, badges and written materials. APR arranges for foreign trainers to visit the country and is working hard to establish a permanent communication link. Other intentions appear to include the creation of a leader handbook and travel to Kabul to assist with leader training.

Keeping in Touch

A huge hurdle to Afghan Scouting is the lack of dependable and inexpensive national communication. There is no countrywide telephone system and roads are generally in poor condition. Although cellular telephone companies have been introducing networks in various parts of the country, there is no national connectivity. The Afghan postal system is being rebuilt but is not yet considered reliable. Computer connectivity is spotty and expensive.

How Many?

The national office pegs the Afghan Scout Movement at 27,000 (21,000 male and 6,000 female); this number is an estimate. Although women and girls are involved with the Afghan Scout program they appear to have little input to national or provincial policy. When male and female Scouts are together in a group the females seldom speak. When encouraged to do so, men sometimes interrupt the response. Only two women appear on the list of commissioners but both are involved solely with female Scouting.

The Kabul National Office

As the national office is so small there is little "horsepower" to pursue initiatives. The lack of individuals willing to share the Scouting workload means many tasks are done sequentially rather than in parallel. Membership registration, for example, is done entirely by hand. Registration forms completed in the provinces are sent by car to Kabul and filed in the national office. There are no computers on which to enter the information and provision of any electronic devices to the national office is probably two or more years in the future.

Leaders

Teachers are very poorly paid in Afghanistan. Meagre salaries are sometimes supported by donations of cooking oil supplied by international aid agencies. Wage payment is sometimes late. Teachers often absent themselves from the schools. Despite this, teachers are, at present, the only acceptable leaders for Afghanistan Scouting.

There is little impetus to offer one's spare time, when the pay is so low. The result is a countrywide lack of leaders. A normal school Scout troop with 35 to 50 members will be allocated one leader. That having been said, some adults are hugely dedicated. They work hard, without much support, to get the Scouts organized. It has been suggested the

Scouts try to recruit volunteer leaders from the community - shopkeepers, engineers, doctors and the like, but to date this has received a lukewarm reception. It is felt leaders should be "professional teachers".

International Support

Other than the ongoing support by APR and the interest of German-based Afghans there is little organized support from the international community. UNICEF, which normally would be involved with youth programs, has been unable to provide any assistance other than the facilitation of a WOSM fact-finding mission in July 2003. Like the Ministry of Education, UNICEF has more pressing requirements. In Afghanistan UNICEF is involved with child soldier demobilization, child trafficking and child malnutrition. The agency also supports a "back to school" initiative that has attracted almost 1.8 million children. Scouting, when compared to the national significance of these initiatives, is a low priority.

Funding

Money is another core issue for Afghan Scouting. Sadly, the ministry provides only token financial support.

The last cash allocation to the national Scout office was in January and provided funds for 100 uniforms to be manufactured and delivered throughout Kabul. The funding situation is not expected to change until more pressing school requirements have been met and Scouting has increased its visibility as a national institution.

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Uniforms

Afghanistan is a country filled with uniforms and the Afghan Scouts are desperate to have them. Indeed, there seems to be more concern about uniform procurement than program development.

Some schools require boys and girls to acquire a uniform before joining Scouts. Even more, it has been mentioned the ownership of a uniform shows dedication, loyalty and commitment.

For many Scouts the purchase price is a problem. Buying material for a shirt and trousers and then having it tailored will cost between 400 and 1100 Afghanis (\$8.00 - \$22.00 USD). A neckerchief will cost 40 Afghanis (\$0.80 USD) and a belt 110 Afghanis (\$2.20 USD). This amount is often beyond a Scout's means. In any event, acquisition of a uniform is normally the youth's responsibility as everyone realizes there is little money available from the ministry. When money does arrive, it is usually for the purchase of adult uniforms.

Scouts with uniforms helping to raise funds for those without is not a well understood concept. In Kabul, though, one troop fundraises - washing cars and helping in shops - and everyone has a uniform. In other parts of the country there is little thought given to working as a team to raise money.

Uniforms vary in colour and design. Gray, navy blue, tan and white uniforms have been seen on boys. Some have been tailored and others

Bright smiles, and blue uniforms - Afghanistan girls in Scouting.





David Ross and his friends.

bought from the bazaar. Caps, although not common, have two styles – pillbox or peaked. The latter have a similar design to army or police caps, but with a coloured band at the front. Female Scouts either have uniforms in various shades of blue or wear the national female school uniform of black dress/white chador (headscarf) with a neckerchief. Some female Scouts wear baseball caps with their hair tucked up underneath.

The national office has designed a new uniform using tan-coloured material. The boys wear a shirt tucked into trousers, a belt, neckerchief and a pillbox cap. Girls wear a similar uniform but a dress is substituted for the shirt.

Neckerchief

The universal Scout identifier is the coloured neckerchief. The Afghans have developed two: one of lapis lazuli blue with a canary yellow border for Scouts, the other a burgundy coloured neckerchief for adults and Rover Scouts. The national office has been promoting the neckerchief as an important uniform item to be acquired first. Even if a Scout does not have the financial re-

sources to afford a uniform, he or she can have a neckerchief. Woggles, the small fastening device used to secure the neckerchief at the throat, can be made from various materials – wood, metal, plastic, leather or bone. Scouts are encouraged to make their own. Many impressive silver, hand-tooled woggles have been seen in the town of Imam Sahib.

Badges

A national Scouting badge is a simple way of tying together all the varying uniforms. It appears the Afghan Scouts have a requirement for two badges: a 6-7 cm diameter circular national pocket badge to be worn on the right chest pocket and an “Afghanistan Scout Association” strip to be worn above the right pocket. The strip will incorporate the Afghan flag.

Knowledge

The level of Scouting knowledge among Afghan Scouts is very low. Few know about Baden-Powell. Some are familiar with the Scout sign and left handshake. There is no awareness of Scouting outside Afghanistan and the information about the worldwide Movement having 28 million

members always draws an incredulous look. Nobody has heard about “Scout skills.” The words “troop” and “patrol” are new.

Scouting is a duty for Afghans. A question about “why was Scouting founded?” invariably brings the answer “to help in the schools”.

Written Material

There is no written material concerning Scouting and all pre-1978 copies of the Afghan Scouting program manual have disappeared. APR has sent Scout troop meeting plans for translation but this task has proved to be daunting, especially as some references in the material are out of context with Afghan society. A small booklet, printed in Dari and to be delivered throughout Afghanistan by the ministry, has been created in an effort to begin countrywide program standardization. It contains, among other things, basic Scouting information like the Law, Promise, Motto, Scouting history, uniform photographs and membership requirements.^m
– *Look for Scouting in Afghanistan, Part Two, in next month's Leader Magazine.*