

# PHOTO ESSAY

# The Story of Hope

Thomas Lee

Afghanistan is back in the news. It is “the other war” that presidential candidates mention in their debates. It is *The Kite Runner*. It is the 23 South Korean missionaries kidnapped near Kandahar by the Taliban. It is Osama Bin Laden and September 11. To Americans, it could be all of the above, but rarely is it a quarter-century of struggle during consecutive wars, fear of violence, and devastated economy. To Afghans, that is both the memory and reality of their homeland entering 2008.

Arzu, meaning “hope” in Dari, is a Chicago-based non-profit organization that has worked in Afghanistan since 2004 to help employ and educate women through sourcing and selling rugs that they weave. For illiterate, underprivileged Afghan women, weaving is often their only option to generate income in a culturally acceptable way. To date, Arzu has enrolled almost 700 women weavers, or 230 families, in the Kabul, Bamyan, and Andkhoi districts. In order to become an Arzu weaver, the women must sign a social contract, agreeing to register their children in school and themselves in literacy classes. In return, Arzu provides these literacy programs and access to health care, and pays weavers fair market value for their work as well as a 50% bonus for the completion of each rug. Profits from the rug sales in the United States allow Arzu to cover its costs and to expand the project.

Arzu’s work—blending private and public sector activities to empower women in remote villages—has so far yielded a sustainable aid operation in a nation contending with the resurgence of the Taliban, an addiction to the opium trade, and the plight of returning refugees. It has demonstrated that perhaps Afghanistan’s greatest hope lies in the gradual undertaking of many small projects.

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1



The fall of the Taliban led to Afghanistan's first democratically elected legislature, but in a land scarred by more than two decades of war, Afghan people still face tremendous challenges: a devastated economy, drug trafficking, the plight of returned refugees, and lingering insecurity due to the resistance of warlords and Taliban remnants.

2



Afghan children play in the war-torn street of Kabul, Afghanistan, July 2006. Sitting at the foot of the Hindu Kush mountains, the flat, brown, dusty capital is slowly being rebuilt. Signs of violence, however, still prevail in the streetscape.



3



The gatekeeper of a building compound in Kabul, Afghanistan, June 2006. Electricity is unstable; Afghans use gas lamps during blackouts, which may happen several times a day.

4



The cannon of a burnt-out tank, most likely a relic of the war against the Soviet Union, lies along the valley road of Bamiyan, Afghanistan, June 2006. Burnt-out tanks can be seen in unexpected places: along village sidewalks, in vegetable fields, or in rivers. They continue to dot the countryside because the money and motivation to dispose of them are luxuries that many parts of Afghanistan cannot afford.



5



A construction site in Kabul, Afghanistan, June 2006.

6



An Afghan child of an Arzu weaver family, Bamiyan, Afghanistan, June 2006. Bamiyan, the location of one of Arzu's three projects and the site where the famous Buddha statues once stood, is located in the rolling mountains northwest of Kabul. Arzu's 70 weaver families in this region are recent returnees from refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan who have had to rebuild their lives completely. Many only recently moved into mud and straw houses after living in UN tents.



7



Arzu weaver Kubra and her family at their home loom in District 10 outside Kabul, Afghanistan, July 2006. Arzu helps 31 weaver families in this impoverished district. The weavers live in one-room rented homes, the Kabul equivalent of Baltimore row houses. The houses are outfitted with common courtyards for shared use of a toilet, a kitchen, a laundry area, and a well for water.

8



Wool storage at Arzu's Kabul office, Afghanistan, July 2006.



9



One of Arzu's weaver villages, Dragon Valley, Bamiyan, Afghanistan, June 2006.



10



An Arzu weaver at her loom, Bamiyan, Afghanistan, June 2006.

11



An Arzu weaver shifts a loom bar to reposition a rug being woven, Bamiyan, Afghanistan, June 2006.



12



Afghan men of Shash Pul, a weaver village, gather for a meeting with Arzu workers, Bamiyan, Afghanistan, June 2006. There is an eagerness to re-establish a sense of community in the weaver village, perhaps because the returnees have experienced similar tribulations; each of the families lost at least one loved one under the Taliban.



13



An Afghan household in Dragon Valley, one of Arzu's weaver villages, Bamiyan, Afghanistan, June 2006.

14



A young Afghan man weaves at his loom, Bamiyan, Afghanistan, June 2006.



15



Afghan children transform war remnants like cannons and burnt trucks into playgrounds in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, June 2006.