



Interview with Fatima Gailani*

President of the Afghan Red Crescent Society.

Ms Fatima Gailani was appointed as the President of the Afghan Red Crescent Society in 2005. She was born in 1954 in Kabul and is the daughter of Pir Sayed Ahmed Gailani, the leader of the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan, who fought against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. She lived in exile during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and acted as spokesperson in London for the Afghan Mujahideen. After her return to Afghanistan she was chosen as a delegate to the Emergency Loya Jirga (Grand Council) of June 2002 and was appointed as a constitution-drafting and -ratifying commissioner. Ms Gailani is the author of two books (The Mosques of London and a biography of Mohammad Musa Shafiq).

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How do you see the conflict in Afghanistan?

It's been going on now for more than thirty years, and I should get used to it. In Afghanistan we went through different stages of conflicts, from an invasion by the superpower of the time to civil war between ethnic or linguistic groups and Islamic sectarian fighting. As Afghans we should get used to it, but conflict is neither normal nor natural, so of course we will not.

My hope is that one day we will see the end of it. I am an optimist by nature, and in my plans and my imagination I always look ahead to the time that, if God wills, there will be no conflict, as it was when I was brought up in Afghanistan. I was lucky enough to see Afghanistan before the wars: a country that was respected, where we lived in harmony. This is all I have been able to do – to hope for the best and deal with what comes today.

* The interview was conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, on 8 March 2011 by Walid Akbar Sarwary, Spokesperson and Head of the Information and Dissemination Department of the Afghan Red Crescent Society.

What are the biggest challenges that war brings to the Afghan community?

It depends who you are speaking to. There are personal problems, of course, such as losing one's livelihood or health. You know, for instance, that we have millions of disabled people. After losing a limb they have to live on, and they have to cope with their disability for the rest of their lives. Some do, some can't. Some lose all interest in life; they turn to drugs, they get up to mischief and suchlike. We have seen it all.

But as someone who was exiled because of the conflict and came back hoping that it was over, but then saw it erupt again, I take a more professional point of view. As the head of the Afghan Red Crescent Society I ask myself what I can do, and, if I cannot end the conflict for these people, how best to approach them to at least ease some of their problems. These problems include poverty and instability, or being an orphan, or a widow with young children. So whatever I can do, I want to do it perfectly for their sake.

The people working for the Afghan Red Crescent certainly are here to provide services for the people who are affected by war. Who typically seeks help from the Afghan Red Crescent?

In conflict we can take different approaches. They will depend on the number of people affected, whether they are wounded, whether they are internally displaced persons, and so on. If there are large numbers of such people within a certain time, such as soon after the conflict, we at least have the luxury of being helped by the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross]. With that help we are able to look after them. But there are times when a smaller number of people are affected by that same conflict: they lose their livelihood, their homes, their health – their ordinary everyday life is destroyed. Though there are not so many of them, this happens quite frequently. Since they come to us a little late, they don't correspond to the criteria for ICRC assistance. Then, of course, we have to deal with them on our own.

For instance, in the minds of people who are disabled, either mentally or physically, the Red Crescent Society is the first place to go to seek help. They come to us for initial treatment, and sometimes, when they are totally exhausted, they come to us again for support. And you cannot argue with them. You cannot tell them they have come too late and that it is no longer within our mandate to help them, or that they don't match our criteria. When someone is sick, tired, with only a penny in their pocket, you cannot reason with them. Somehow you have to help them. Again, a considerable amount of our time and resources is devoted to those people.

And then there are the women and children who are victims of conflict – I don't ever want to get used to that, although I see them every day. You can never imagine how it is when a widow comes with small children. They have lost their father, the family's only breadwinner, and there the woman is, illiterate, without any skills, young and vulnerable, with at least three children to care for. So we have to step in. And there is nowhere else for her to go.

What are the biggest challenges you face in helping those people?

We don't have the luxury of singling out one or two or even three challenges. We have lots of challenges because the needs are so vast and our funds are so often inadequate. So lack of funds is the main problem. Another problem is that sometimes we cannot get to those people because Afghanistan is full of mountains and deep valleys, and the roads are not good. Even if you are not empty-handed and do have something to give, it is extremely hard to reach them. And sometimes, for instance after the earthquake that struck a valley south of Samangan, it takes them a long time to get to us or even to contact the government somewhere so that we are informed. The terrain is extremely difficult, and, although telecommunication is now really good, there are still places without access to it.

So sometimes we are too late in getting to them, or – most of the time – they are too late in coming to us. Even so, we are in a much better position than anyone else because of the presence of our volunteers. We will know much sooner than others, but still not as soon as I want it to be.

The armed conflict in Afghanistan is ongoing, and many provinces or districts that were safe before are now increasingly facing security challenges. What are your concerns about this development?

Naturally, as a normal Afghan, my concern is: when will peace come? When am I going to have a normal life? That is my question mark. But apart from that, as the president of such a big humanitarian institution and speaking on its behalf, our concern is that the expectations are much greater than our possibilities. This means that we will have more of a problem financially. And then, of course, even access to areas where people need our help is of constant concern. It is thanks to our neutrality that we have been able to reach people, be accepted by both sides, and have far better access than anyone else in Afghanistan. But to maintain that access, we have to be politically very careful, very alert, aware that the slightest violation of our neutrality or independence could endanger it. That is vitally important to ensure that we do not lose our ability to reach those people.

Yet even if we preserve our independence and neutrality perfectly and thus have access and are accepted by all sides, how can we deal with such vast problems if our hands are empty? And don't forget, in Afghanistan it's not just conflict alone, but conflict and natural disasters everywhere. So we can really do very little when confronted with the problems there today.

What are the future plans for the National Society, and especially its activities in aid of people who are or may in future be affected by the conflict?

My hope is to gain the support of people or organizations that can help us. But again, we have to be extremely careful not to violate our neutrality and independence. That is not easy. It's like walking on a tightrope: we have to maintain the balance. But we also have to be much better at our own work, so at least, if we are more efficient, our small funds will be too. I hope to introduce reforms in some areas where our efforts have been unsuccessful and thus to attain that objective.

Today Afghanistan is experiencing donor fatigue, whether within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement or more widely with regard to the country as a whole. For thirty-two years, which is a long, long time, we have needed help from others. So I am trying very hard to set a new course. Our New Year starts very soon, and my promise to myself – more to myself than to others – is that I will reactivate our own resources and capabilities, so that, if one day we stand alone, we will at least have something in hand.

Focus on the Afghan Red Crescent Society

The Afghan Red Crescent Society (ARCS) came into being in 1929, under the name National Assisting Council, and had twenty members. Under the name Red Adytum the Council became a branch office within the framework of the Ministry of Finance in 1932, and a few months later was attached to the Ministry of Public Health.

In 1934, the Council was renamed the Red Crescent and joined the Ministry of the Interior. In 1951, the responsibilities and obligations of the organization (which had an independent status) were defined in its charter, and it became an independent charity. Four years later it was officially recognized by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and admitted as a full member to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (then the League).

The Afghan Red Crescent Society is the only humanitarian, neutral, impartial, and independent National Society in the country. Today it has thirty-four branches and over 45,000 registered volunteers, whose close proximity to communities provides it with a comparative advantage of delivering timely humanitarian aid where others cannot. It is the only Afghan civil society organization with a countrywide presence assisting destitute and other affected people during natural and manmade disasters.

The ARCS endeavours to fulfil the objectives of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, namely to prevent and alleviate human suffering and to provide support to the most vulnerable people of the country. The provision of assistance without any discrimination to the destitute and the victims of disaster is one of the main responsibilities of the ARCS, which are clearly laid down in its Constitution. When necessary, and within its capabilities, it also carries out other activities to alleviate human suffering at specific times and in specific circumstances.

The ARCS provides its services in various fields, such as health care, disaster management, Marastoons,¹ food-for-work/vocational training projects, youth and volunteers' activities, tracing relatives and restoring family links for detainees whose contacts with their families have been cut, dissemination of humanitarian values and promotion of respect for human dignity, and dissemination of international humanitarian law.

1 The ARCS Marastoons, meaning 'places to find help', are a social institution with a long history, traditionally focusing on providing temporary shelter for destitute people. The homes have a special place in the history of the Afghan people. By offering vocational training and work experience in areas such as tailoring, carpentry, and carpet-weaving, they help facilitate the resettlement of residents back into their communities.