



30 years in Afghanistan. ICRC photo archives account by Alberto Cairo

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The *Review* asked Alberto Cairo, head of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) orthopaedic programme in Afghanistan since 1992, to make his own selection of pictures from the ICRC's photo library collection, which covers its activities in conflicts throughout the world from the 1860s to the present day.¹ There are now more than 115,000 photos available in digital format.

Alberto, an Italian national, studied law before becoming a physiotherapist. From 1987 he spent three years in Juba, Sudan, with *L'Organismo di Volontariato per la Cooperazione Internazionale (OVCI)*, an Italian non-governmental organization for disabled children. In 1990 he joined the ICRC and was assigned to its Surgical Hospital for War Wounded in Kabul. Apart from a short ICRC mission in Sarajevo in 1993, he has never left Afghanistan. In 1994, during Afghanistan's civil war, Alberto worked with the ICRC's Economic Security Department to assist the internally displaced inhabitants of Kabul. Today, he is responsible for the country's seven ICRC orthopaedic centres, a programme that provides the disabled with physical rehabilitation and social reintegration.

Through his selection and comments, Alberto gives his personal account of his experiences while working closely with the people through the different stages of Afghanistan's troubled contemporary history.

ICRC presence in Afghanistan

The ICRC has been present in Afghanistan since 1979, working initially out of Pakistan, and since 1987 from its delegation in Kabul. Today, Afghanistan is the ICRC's largest operation worldwide. The institution has over 130 expatriates and more than 1,400 national staff based in Kabul and in fourteen other locations throughout the country.

The ICRC regularly visits places of detention run by nations contributing to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), by the US forces, and by the Afghan authorities. The aim is to monitor conditions of detention and the treatment of detainees. In 2010, it also began visiting people detained by the armed opposition. Moreover, it helps families who are separated by the conflict to stay in touch with one another through Red Cross messages and telephone calls, and endeavours to trace those family members who have gone missing.

The ICRC assists Sheberghan Hospital in the north of Afghanistan and Mirwais Regional Hospital in the south, both of which are run by the Ministry of Public Health. Some twenty expatriate doctors, nurses, and administrative personnel are based in Kandahar, and provide support to the medical, administrative, and logistics staff at Mirwais. The ICRC also gives technical and financial support for ten Afghan Red Crescent clinics and for their community-based first-aid volunteers who deliver health care to people in their respective villages. In addition, the ICRC runs four first-aid posts in areas where conflict is ongoing.

One of the ICRC's most important activities in Afghanistan is the distribution of aid, in co-operation with the Afghan Red Crescent Society, to tens of thousands of people displaced by the fighting. Meanwhile, ICRC water engineers work closely with local water boards on urban and rural programmes. The institution promotes hygiene awareness in religious schools and detention centres, and with families in their homes.

Reminding parties to a conflict of their obligation to protect civilians and keep them safe from harm is a fundamental part of the ICRC's efforts to promote compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL) worldwide. In Afghanistan, the institution spreads knowledge of IHL within civil society, government bodies, the armed forces, and armed opposition groups country-wide.

1 The ICRC photo galleries are available at: <http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/photos/index.jsp> (last visited 17 May 2011).



12/1989 © CICR/PIRALLA, Cédric

Takhar province. Ethnic Turkman mujahideen get ready to fight.

After the Russian invasion in December 1979, the Islamic resistance was immediately organized with the help of Pakistan and the Western countries. A farmer assisting his wounded son explained that, in his village, the commander demanded at least two pairs of hands from every family. 'And if someone refuses?' I asked. 'Shame and fear prevent him. Anyway, where could he hide?' The commander had absolute power. Meanwhile, the only ways to avoid conscription by the government side were by leaving the country or joining the mujahideen. The foreign press lauded the mujahideen to the skies, calling them champions of liberty, fearless heroes, martyrs. Seen from close quarters, the halo lost its shine and serious misdemeanours appeared. To fight for the independence of one's own country did not justify disproportionate reprisals and vendettas, above all the bombs that for years had been launched against the civilian population of besieged Kabul. At the same time, many commanders were being openly accused of amassing fortunes by pocketing the funds sent from abroad.



12/1989 © CICR/PIRALLA, Cédric

Laghman province. A camel caravan brings weapons to the mujahideen.

The Russians and the Afghan communist regime tried to stop the convoys supplying the mujahideen with weapons. This was a futile enterprise, since the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan was impossible to control. When in 1992 the US and Russia agreed to provide no more weapons to the Afghan factions, Afghanistan was already packed with arms of all kinds. There were landmines laid everywhere, making Afghanistan one of the most mined countries in the world, a legacy for many years to come.



11/01/1989 © CICR/HALONEN, Pekka

Kabul. An ICRC convoy transports goods for the detainees of Pul-i-charki prison.

From the early 1980s, one by one the Western embassies were shut down and foreign businesses and many humanitarian organizations recalled their personnel. To see the ICRC settle in Afghanistan made many both happy and puzzled at the same time. Taking care of detainees? Allowed by the communist authorities? They had never heard of anything like this. Amid hope and fear, the Afghans understood that important changes were in the air.



01/12/1988 © CICR/FRESARD, Claire

Kabul. ICRC surgical hospital for war wounded, Karte Seh.

After the Soviet invasion in 1979, the Afghan authorities refused to allow the ICRC into the country, obliging it to operate from Pakistan. It was only allowed to return in 1987, thanks to the policy of 'national reconciliation'. A hospital was immediately opened for war wounded. There one could witness a daily miracle. The ICRC ambulances left Kabul, crossed the front line that encircled it, and reached the first-aid posts set up by the mujahideen in the fields. There they collected the wounded and brought them back to the capital, controlled by the communist regime. The governing bodies guaranteed safe passage to everyone travelling in vehicles marked with the red cross or being treated in our hospital, providing a genuine example of diplomatic immunity. Not bad for a reputedly barbarous population. I remember the crackling radio conversations between nurses in the ambulances and the hospital, the provisional diagnoses, the orders for us to be ready to receive and treat the wounded immediately on arrival. Once recovered, they would be returned to the villages on the other side.



21/10/1990 © CICR/BREGNARD, Didier

Afghan women washing clothes in a river.

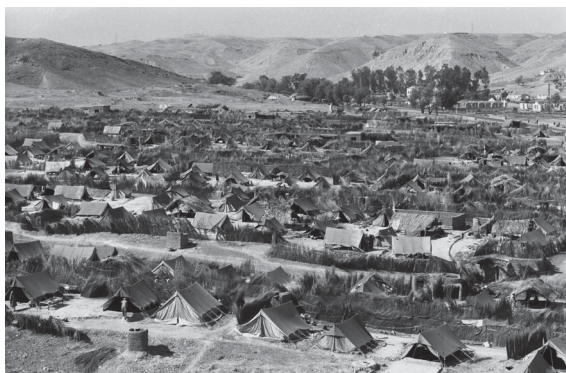
The idyllic atmosphere of this picture is deceptive. The burden of the war falls heavily on Afghan women. Often left to fend for themselves and for their children, they have to face both prejudices and traditions, and are twice punished, by the war and by the customs of the country.



02/1993 © CICR/MULLER, Yannick

Coming from Pakistan, an ICRC convoy transports medicines for the hospitals of Kabul.

After the mujahideen took Kabul in 1992, life continued amid the fighting. Prices in the bazaar were forced up by the greed of merchants and by the heavy taxes imposed by the mujahideen whenever it suited them. The road between Kabul and Jalalabad, the only route for goods coming in from Pakistan, had at least twenty roadblocks where merchandise could be confiscated with complete impunity. Trying to persuade armed and aggressive men to spare the ICRC trucks carrying medical supplies to the hospitals was hard work. Several vehicles were stolen. The arrival of the convoys in Kabul were greeted with cheers by the exhausted population.



20/05/1994 © CICR/GASSMANN, Thierry

Jalalabad. Samarkhel camp.

War and regime changes have systematically displaced entire communities. In 1994, when the mujahideen of Dustom and Hekmatiar attacked Masood's positions, thousands of people fled from Kabul to Jalalabad, followed a few days later by the inhabitants of the Tagab Valley, forced to leave their homes as well. Jalalabad became surrounded by camps of displaced people, satellite towns in the desert, composed of tents: Farm-e-hada, Surkh-dewal Muntaz, Camp-e-Tagab, Samarkhel. Samarkhel, with 30,000 people, was the biggest camp. The ICRC provided the displaced inhabitants with essential items such as drinking water, latrines, food, and blankets. When I visited the camp, I had the impression of witnessing a tragedy of dreadful proportions. Nevertheless people were smiling, determined not to give up.



23/05/1994 © CICR/GASSMANN, Thierry

Kabul, 1994. A mujahideen leads a child through the ruins.

The whole city of Kabul woke up at 4:30 a.m. on 1 January 1994. For a few seconds I stayed in bed listening to the noises, the whistle of bombs passing overhead and the explosive bang of impact. I counted the explosions. After the tenth I decided to go down to the kitchen, the safest room in the house, and slipped into knee socks and anorak. Bursts of machine-gun fire sounded close. I could hear shouts, orders perhaps. A second later I heard the crash of breaking glass coming from the upper floor. The windows were rattling. I was worried. I had seen houses set on fire by splinters from a Howitzer. I had to check. On my way upstairs I was all but knocked over by a blast of icy wind from my bedroom. The big window overlooking the courtyard lay in splinters. Falling, it had dragged to the floor the thick curtain designed to keep out light and draughts. There was no sign of fire. I piled books, blankets, and clothes onto the bed and bundled them up in a sheet. The machine-gun fire started again. There was no time to think. Closing the door behind me, I fled downstairs murmuring 'Happy New Year!'



02/1996 © CICR/AHAD, Zalmat

Kabul. At the ICRC orthopaedic centre, prosthetic feet are manufactured in their thousands.

The first ICRC orthopaedic centre for war amputees opened in Kabul in 1988. Not considered a priority, prosthetics and physiotherapy were stopped as soon as the fighting intensified and the centre closed for weeks. But the sight of hundreds of one-legged people in the streets and the awareness of how a prosthesis could improve the quality of their life led us to change our minds. Since 1994, the orthopaedic centre in Kabul has always remained open, suspending the activity only when absolutely necessary (often for only a few hours), moving four times, and installing and dismantling the workshop in record time, thanks to the dedication of the Afghan workers, who are almost all ex-patients and themselves disabled. Today, looking back to those times, I wonder how they coped in those dramatic days. I was roused by their determination. Unstoppable.



01/01/1997 © CICR/DAGOE, Jan

Kabul. Taliban fighters.

We first heard of the Taliban in 1994. Rumours spread fast. 'People from Kandahar, possibly from Pakistan'; 'They are fighting the warlords, they kick them out'; 'They are removing check points and bandits from the roads! And they do not steal!'; 'But who are they?'; 'If they bring peace they are welcome, whoever they are!'. It did not end like that. Things got much more complex.



25/09/1998 © CICR/PAGETTI, Franco

Kabul. Widows queueing at a relief distribution centre.

From 1995 to 2001, support for widows and disabled people was left entirely on the shoulders of the international organizations, the ICRC among them. A woman told me it was the saddest experience of her life. Not so much for the effort of standing for hours in line, come rain come shine, but for the humiliation. 'I am a teacher, I have always worked. This is begging.' But she was grateful for that food keeping her family alive. Like thousands of women, with the arrival of the Taliban she had lost her job. A widow with four children and no brothers or in-laws who could help, she had been through terrible days. And she could do nothing but live with it. Each distribution was a sea of blue, lavender, or dark yellow burqas slowly swaying. Identical figures with no identity. I found them disturbing.



12/2001 © CICR/DRIESSE, Christophe

Shibartu village, Bamiyan province. Ethnic Hazaras at a food supply distribution point.

Besieged by the Taliban, the Hazaras who managed to flee took refuge in the upper part of their valleys – places of stunning beauty but appalling living conditions. It took a long time before the news of the Hazaras' ordeal was known. The ICRC eventually managed to bring them relief and help despite huge difficulties and after severe delays. Many of the displaced people had by then died of starvation or exposure.



04/1995 © CICR/MARCO, Iavelli

Bamiyan. Young amputee in front of a 53-metre high Buddha dating from the 5th century.

The picture is a memory of what is lost forever. March 2001. No one believed it at first, then pictures confirmed the news. The Buddhas of Bamiyan had been destroyed. Carved in the fourth of fifth century and admired by millions of pilgrims and tourists from every country, they were part of the heritage of mankind, the pride of the Afghan people, and unique works of art. 'Every pagan symbol must be destroyed,' the Taliban told journalists when the demolition was complete. It had taken four days of trial and error before they managed to destroy them. Four days to obliterate masterpieces that had stood for millennia. The deed was the subject of many long discussions on radio and television all over the world. Rather than purely iconoclastic madness, the main motive was one of vendetta, to punish the West for refusing to recognize the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. I remember several Afghans crying at the news.



01/2001 © World Picture News/HAKIMI, Abdul Qadir

Kabul, November 2001. ICRC collecting the dead bodies of Taliban fighters killed while retreating. Out of respect for human dignity, the burial of corpses abandoned by the roadside is a matter of urgency. Bodies are lying in many parts of the city. In Shar-e-Naw, the city centre, we count nearly twenty. The first four we find are horribly mutilated. We have no idea how they met with such a fate. Twelve more are found in the park. Separated from their retreating colleagues, they had sought protection up in the trees, from where, we are told, they shouted and fired at the people below before becoming easy targets themselves. They were all only boys, probably foreign. Having recomposed the bodies as fast as possible, we number and photograph them in case their families come looking for them.



09/2002 © CICR/HEATHCOTE, Carlo

Kabul. Rebuilding houses.

From early 2002, Afghan refugees started streaming back from Pakistan and Iran. A new and wonderful experience for Afghanistan: the fragmented country was becoming whole again. Trucks piled high with bundles, furniture, bicycles arrived in the city every day. The men and boys sat on top of the household goods. The younger ones might never have seen Kabul, or perhaps, after being away for so many years, had forgotten what it was like. The women and girls sat lower down, all in burqas, all looking around with curiosity. It would have been splendid if only there had been houses and factories, functioning schools, and hospitals awaiting them. Instead, when they arrived they were left to their own devices and had to survive as best they could. The first priority was to find a house. Kabul has since become a huge building yard, where every space is used. The rich build incredible mansions in the residential areas, with columns, mosaics, and huge glass walls; the poor a few rooms on the slope of the hills, in violation of the town planning – they could be demolished at any time.



08/2004 © CICR/VOETEN, Teun Anthony

Zabul province, Kak Afghan district. After receiving information that Taliban might be hiding out in the village of Gozak, C-Company searches the village. Soldiers kick in a locked door.

The war is far from being over in many regions. Their number is growing. 'Every American search is a blow to the peace process,' a resident of Zabul told me. 'Entering our houses, violating our privacy, and terrorizing our children will never be forgiven.'



09/2003 © CICR/WAHIDY, Farzana

Kabul, district 7. Women reading brochures on mine awareness.

Nobody knows how many landmines and other explosive remnants of war there are. Every day at least two incidents are reported (in 2002, they were up to fifteen a day). Besides de-mining, prevention through mine awareness programmes is essential, above all for children, women, and anyone with limited access to news and general information. Many victims are still the children of poor families who collect and sell scrap metal, despite such practices being forbidden.



08/10/2005 © CICR/MOECKLI, Olivier

Herat, ICRC Orthopaedic Centre. A landmine victim at the training section.

The Orthopaedic Centres of the ICRC are a focal point for those who have lost a limb due to landmines. At the beginning bewildered and afraid, they soon learn to stand and walk again. But, over the years, I have come to realize that, when you lose a limb, a bit of your life, your heart, and your mind are also lost. And while you can be given a plastic leg easily enough, who is going to give you back the other things? Most of the amputees we see are men between the ages of 20 and 35: the years when they marry, become fathers, and are working to support themselves and their dependants. All of a sudden they lose everything, perhaps for ever. They are dependent on others, the future looks black. In Afghanistan there are no insurance schemes, no health service, no social assistance. Are these not valid reasons for despair? Many disabled people recover from depression when given a job or a micro-loan to start a business. Others fail to respond to our attempts.



29/03/2006 © CICR/LOUIS, Virginie

Kunduz province. A Red Cross message is handed to the family of a man detained in Guantanamo. The delivery of a Red Cross message is always a very moving moment. A thing that was in the hands of someone detained far away is brought to his family, with a message in it. Fathers, mothers, and children kiss the paper as a sacred relic, in tears. The link is re-established, hope grows stronger.



23/10/2007 © CICR/KOKIC, Marko

Kandahar, central prison. ICRC protection delegates visit 200 security detainees.

On several occasions, I accompanied colleagues from the ‘protection’ programme when they visited prisons. Their job was to register the new arrivals, have private conversations with the detainees, collect messages for delivery to their families, and ensure that conditions in the cells were humane. Every time, we found disabled prisoners with broken prostheses; and since the authorities forbade us to transfer them to the Orthopaedic Centre, replacements had to be made in the prison. The curiosity aroused by the prospect of seeing inside a prison vanished at the first visit. No sooner had I stepped inside the heavy main door than I was gripped by a feeling of anguish. Our delegates had to overcome this every day. It was difficult enough to listen to the detainees’ stories, to see the treatment that rode roughshod over their dignity; but to involve oneself in long discussions with the prison authorities in order to guarantee a decent existence for the inmates seemed, to me at least, almost impossible. Dialogue and persuasion are the techniques adopted by the Red Cross. If the manager is not complying with his duties one takes the complaint to increasingly higher authorities, even as far as the minister or head of state. This is done without scandal or leaks to the press, which would only recoil upon the detainees themselves and make things even worse for them. Delegates and interpreters frequently stumbled out of the interminable meetings exhausted and frustrated. I would have cried the whole affair from the rooftops, let everybody know what was going on. But one had to bite one’s tongue.



20/10/2010 © CICR/HOLT, Kate

Kandahar, ICRC Office. Relatives talking to a detainee in Guantánamo, where he has been held for nine years, via video telephone conference.

In 2008, a new service was introduced for those detained in the American prison of Bagram, 60 kilometres north of Kabul, a maximum security centre, a Guantánamo in Afghanistan: a videophone connection between the ICRC main office in Kabul and the prison. A crowd of men, women, and children regularly gather to see and hear relatives who have been imprisoned for years, assuring themselves that they are alive. Most of them come from rural areas, simple people, intimidated by TV and microphones. They cry, laugh, speak all at once, touch the screen. Now they can even see and talk to their relatives detained in the real Guantánamo, across the sea. Hurray for the new technology!



26/10/2007 © CICR/KOKIC, Marko

Kabul, Darulaman Palace. Afghanistan and its people have endured close to three decades of war.

'Darulaman Palace was our pride. Now it is our shame. We have destroyed it, with our own hands,' an old shopkeeper told me. 'What have we become?' A sad state of affairs when you think of the potential of the Afghans. Combining intelligence, curiosity, and common sense, they are quick to learn, can adapt to very dangerous, difficult situations with humour and resourcefulness, and are physically tough (partly due to the relentless natural selection of infant mortality) and hard workers, yet they have become one of the most wretched peoples on earth.