

Hope and Healing

A team from MU's international center for psychosocial trauma traveled to Pakistan earlier this month to help Afghan refugees.

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Their words paint a dire picture of the past and present, yet they hold out hope for the people of Afghanistan. Representatives from the University of Missouri-Columbia's International Center for Psychosocial Trauma recently returned from the war-torn nation with accounts of life in refugee camps. The team taught Afghan teachers, physicians and mental-health workers how to help children cope with the violence and loss they have endured.

Elizabeth Lowenhaupt, an MU medical student who served as the delegation's recorder, said the behavior of children living in the refugee camps near Peshawar, Pakistan, reflects the collective trauma they have suffered.

" They all play with toy guns - making sticks into machine guns - and play without regard to the safety of others," she said. "I watched two teams of children play a war game. The weak and emaciated ones were the Taliban, and the strong ones were the Americans, who threw rocks at the Taliban.

" The teachers we worked with told us that most of the kids in class have school phobia," Lowenhaupt added. "They are fearful and afraid to leave their homes because they have seen traumatic incidents and are scared they will happen again. They seem especially afraid of beards, and they feel helpless."

Lowenhaupt accompanied child psychiatrist Arshad Husain, psychologist Barbara Bauer, education Professor Venetta Whitaker and journalism Professor Michael Grinfeld on the trip. The team ran workshops in the Pakistani cities of Islamabad, Lahore and Peshawar and in a refugee camp near Peshawar.

It was a demanding assignment.

Approximately 2 million Afghans have fled across the border into Pakistan during the past 23 years to escape war with the Soviets and deadly internal conflicts. More than half of these refugees live in 127 camps.

During the past five years, many have sought refuge from the strict Taliban rule that discriminates against women. Severe drought and the threat of starvation forced other Afghans to leave their homeland for the camps. Most arrived bearing only what they could carry on their backs through the mountain passes.

The MU team visited Akora Khattak, a small camp in northern Pakistan that provides food and shelter to 18,000 Afghan refugees. There is a chronic shortage of water. Some 10,000 children are crowded into a cluster of mud-walled huts on a dusty plain. The

children look unwashed, and most have dirty faces. Life as a refugee is hard, and staying alive is a hand-to-mouth existence. Some get only one meal a day. Women who once were schoolteachers in Afghanistan beg for alms, and their children collect garbage.

Carpet factories in the area employ large numbers of refugees, which has caused hard feelings among Pakistanis who complain that the large labor pool has driven down wages and increased local unemployment.

Inside Akora Khattak, 600 boys and 300 girls attend class in a clay-brick school supported by Human Concerns International. They call that part of the camp Hope Village. All of these children are considered orphans because their fathers have been killed. The curriculum for both girls and boys consists of literacy and job training. Girls are taught sewing and carpet making, while the boys learn carpentry and metal working. The products they manufacture are sold to help meet the expenses of running Hope Village.

Human Concerns International provided funding for the MU team to establish a counseling center within the camp, which opened the first week of March. Two Pakistani psychiatrists and a social worker have been hired.

But it wasn't easy, team members said.

The first step often involves convincing the local mental-health workers that they have experienced trauma themselves.

Their first response is "we have no psychological problems," said Husain, director of the MU psychosocial trauma center.

The team frequently finds that psychological and behavioral problems caused by trauma are not discussed and recognized for what they are - normal responses to crisis events. Once the trainees recognize that the flashbacks, sleep problems, depression and suicidal thoughts they are having are shared by others, they become very interested in learning about how to deal with these symptoms, Husain explained.

At Hope Village, the team worked with 60 trainees, including 22 teachers.

" All of our classes were translated into the Pashtun language," Husain said. "We were fortunate to have a very good interpreter, a psychiatrist who we hired to be one of the staff of the new counseling center we established."

The Pakistani psychiatrists and social worker have a difficult task in front of them. The MU team reported observing:

*More than 80 percent of the adults who were examined at the refugee camp outside Peshawar exhibited signs of anxiety, depression and other mental disorders, which often lead to child abuse. Most are prescribed psychotropic drugs.

*Young students who have lost siblings or parents to violence have a difficult time concentrating in school. Many are afraid to leave their homes.

*A woman in the maternity ward at a local hospital developed a psychosis after her parents and family were killed and she was sold to another man. She had disorganized speech and behavior.

*A former psychology teacher who was injured by a rocket reported that eight of his 17 children had been killed.

The MU team plans to bring six to 10 of these students to Columbia this summer for additional training.

" These students really engaged with us," said Whitaker, who conducted a session on utilizing art as therapy.

" They leaned forward, eyes fixed on us, taking in every word we spoke," she added. "They said we were bringing them a candle of hope. I believe children need hope and that art can provide hope and healing."

Lowenhaupt said the trip was enlightening.

" I felt a tremendous respect for these people who were telling stories of unimaginable horror yet attending our seminar in order to try to help others begin to recover and deal with the trauma," she said. "Many people hate the Russians because of the long association, some hate the Taliban but they didn't have as long a role in their repression. They see Americans as new and ... there are no negative feelings toward them.

" Most Afghans, however, are just afraid of everyone."