



Tulips in a Minefield

Story and photos courtesy of Stephen Lynch

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A valet parking attendant discovers his life's calling -- to rebuild Afghanistan

Afghanistan, the graveyard of empires, consumed every army that marched across its sands, repelled every general that assaulted its mountains. The Greeks, the British, the Russians -- all fed its earth with their blood. One frigid night in what passed for spring, we found out why.

We were huddled, a half-dozen soft Americans, on the side of a sheer cliff, cold rain staining our faces and eroding our footholds. A storm had washed away the bridge across the Salang River, cutting off the only road back to Kabul. In Afghanistan, where families still live in bombed-out buildings and farmers plow fields riddled with mines, one learns to improvise. We abandoned the car and continued on foot into the night.

Our guides, former *mujahidin*, the Islamic warriors who had defeated the Soviets, had promised a forty-five minute walk down the river's edge, on a path that was "wonderful." Now, two hours later, clinging to ledge suitable only for mountain goats, we muttered our prayers and tried not to look down into the dark, roiling water.

The *mujahidin* were rail-thin men in turbans and black beards, shouldering Kalashnikovs and moving at a half-run. They eyed us with a mixture of bemusement and pity. The leader of our party, Abulfazel Khalili, spoke Farsi, but was fatter than most Afghans they knew. The two white men, myself and freelance videographer Rick Luch, took a lot of pictures and were a nuisance, if not worthless.

But the last three, they were something else entirely. Nazifa, Maryam and Ilaha -- women! They were Afghans, but dressed like Americans. No burkas! The men were

embarrassed to even look at them, and refused to help them. They were terrified to touch a woman to whom they were not married or related.

Khalili and the women were members of the [Afghanistan Relief Organization](#), a charity group founded by Afghans living in Southern California. It was the last week of a month-long mission to deliver school supplies to children crowded in tents and mud shacks. Things had been going well, all things (rockets, bandits, terrible roads) considered. Then, on the way back from a trip to Mazar-i-Sharif, a storm trapped the group in the Salang Pass, the only way back to Kabul.

The pass was a key ingredient in the victory of the *mujahidin*, who evened the odds against the Soviet army in its rocky confines. Unfortunately, the gorge has the same effect on the armies of aid workers trying to rebuild the country after two decades of war.

Suffering the most, yet soldiering silently, was Nazifa Etemadi, a plump, grandmotherly woman who lived much of her life in Mission Viejo. When we reached the first tributary, the men took running starts and jumped the gap. Then we tossed the smallest woman, Ilaha, hobbit-style. For Etemadi, who was already walking with a limp, this was not an option. We tried rolling large rocks into the water, but they were carried away with comic ease.

Arms linked to her companions, Etemadi tried stepping across, but slipped and fell, prone, into the water. The freezing current threatened to sweep her into the blackness. Forming a human chain, we managed to drag her to shore, where she collapsed to her knees. Her face was blank, her mind trying desperately to will herself numb.

As our flashlights went dead, one by one, and the rain intensified, *mujahidin* propriety turned to farce. Slipping down a rock face, in danger of breaking a leg, Etemadi begged for assistance, and they finally complied. But their help was as impersonal as they could manage, shoving her over impediments like a pack animal. It seemed like days before we reached the village.

It was too late to get another car, so one of the guides invited us into his mud home. Muslim virtues ruled once more, and the women were ushered ahead of us to cover themselves and settle into a private room. The men were brought into another area and covered with rugs that smelled like goat. We were a disaster, our clothes ruined, Luch's video camera destroyed.

Khalili, finally relaxed, patted me on the shoulder.

"Every so often," he said, "you must have a bad day."

Every aid agency working in Afghanistan today needs a fixer, someone equally adept at dodging bullets and bureaucracy. Abulfazel Khalili is one of the best. He came late to this avocation, having spent his youth on drink and dallying. Like many Afghans, Khalili fled his country during its long war against the Soviet Union, and didn't dare hope to return.

He had long ago forged a quiet life in his new home, America. The grandson of a poet laureate, the nephew of a diplomat, the cousin of a warlord, Khalili was content to work as a valet parking attendant.

But fifteen years ago, on a whim, Khalili joined an aid mission to a ruined Afghanistan village, and it stirred both his conscience and his nationalism. Suddenly, his homeland wasn't a distant tragedy -- it was the starving child in front of him. Rebuilding Afghanistan became his obsession.

Khalili returned to Afghanistan at least once every year since, and soon learned his way around its feudal chaos. He founded the ARO with only a few friends and a mailbox in Canoga Park. He would fly into Tajikistan and cross the border on foot, to avoid the Taliban. He hired horses to deliver food and clothes to remote villages devastated by earthquakes.

Like the tough mountain men who battled the Russians, Khalili learned to thrive in an inhospitable land. He is the *mujahidin* of charity.

Khalili is 46, short, stocky and intense, like a boxer's cornerman. When he's being sarcastic, which is always, his dark glasses slide down his nose. When he's on duty -- that is, when he's quit yet another job and gone off to live two or three months in Afghanistan -- he's usually dressed in the black vest that makes him look like a cross between a Soldier of Fortune cover model and a fly fisherman.

Impatience and a wry charisma are Khalili's most important tools. He comes swaggering into a room, clapping his hands, his voice booming, "Let's go! Let's go!" Then he gives his companions a toothy smile and starts singing in off-key Farsi.

"He is good at making friends with everybody," said Abdul Satar, the vice chairman of the ARO and one of Khalili's closest companions.

One day, after being informed of this compliment, Khalili broke into a wide smile. "Oh yes, everyone knows me in Kabul," he said. Then he rolled down his window and called out to a random man on the street, "*Salam alekum!*" Confused, the man responded with the Muslim greeting of "God be with you, too."

"See?" Khalili said, smiling.

It is Khalili's job to cut through the daunting problems of Afghanistan -- the regional warlords, the Islamic fundamentalism, the rampant poverty -- which threaten to defeat rebuilding efforts as easily as any invading army. There are about 1,200 foreign aid groups in Afghanistan today. Nearly \$1.8 billion has been donated. But the task is monumental. Illiteracy stands at nearly 90 percent. More than 5 million refugees require resettlement. Even in Kabul, reliable electricity may be two years away. The legions of charity workers pursuing "nation building" could be just another empire added to Afghanistan's graveyard.

It may be that the greatest hope for a peaceful Afghanistan -- and, by extension, a safer United States -- lies with Afghan-Americans like Khalili. They are living in Kabul now, in small offices, with smaller budgets, teaching classes, running ministries. They know the culture of Afghanistan, they speak the language, yet they also bring with them the expectations of freedom and dreams of prosperity.

But most importantly, they have the passion. Khalili envisions a better Afghanistan, and he will achieve it, no matter how many bad days it takes. To him, it's a way of helping both countries -- the place he came from, and the land that sheltered him.

After the attacks of 9/11, a group of Afghan-American women in Orange County, including Etemadi, collected school supplies to rebuild their homeland. They gathered two tractor trailers full of desks from Laguna Beach, calculators from DayRunner, Inc. and shoes from Quiksilver, among other donations.

To make sure the materials made it into the right hands, Khalili was the logical partner. "He is a man who knows how to get things done," Etemadi said.

It took a year and a half, but finally Afghanistan calmed enough for the ARO to risk the trip. In April, a dozen of the women flew to Kabul to join Khalili, who was already there arranging their month-long mission of mercy.

Getting a pen or notebook into the hands of a student is a complicated process in Afghanistan. Trucks through Pakistan often are hijacked, so the ARO shipped desks and computers to Finland, where they were driven through Russia and Uzbekistan. Once in Afghanistan, the materials needed to be properly protected and carried over dangerous roads to distant, rudimentary schools.

In the month ahead, the ARO volunteers would deal with warlords, car trouble, and widespread prejudice against women. But they would put school supplies in the hands of more than 1,200 children who had only written in dirt, girls who had been forbidden to learn.

This would not be the Afghanistan the members of the ARO remembered. Their childhood, in the 1960s, was an enlightened time, at least for the more wealthy, urban areas of the nation. Women went to university, political parties were formed, the press enjoyed more freedoms. But war and Islamic fundamentalism changed all that. Once women in Kabul wore miniskirts and big hair. Now almost every one of them wore burkas.

Khalili and the others were trying to recreate the land they remembered, using education as a foundation.

The first sign that the ARO members had left behind the world of shopping malls and homeland security was the flight to Kabul. Refugees are flooding back into Afghanistan today, each one undeterred by the limits on luggage or weight. The flight from Frankfurt,

on Afghanistan's Ariana Airlines, was so full that the attendants put the ticket-holders in jump seats and then, when those ran out, sat them in the aisles.

Many of them believed this moment would never come. Afghanistan was a distant horror, a young girl with haunted eyes on a magazine cover. Schoolchildren struggled to find it on maps of Central Asia. In terms of American foreign policy, the country's civil war ranked somewhere below trade with Moldova. Afghans living abroad hadn't forgotten, but many had given up hope.

"It is a tragedy what happened to the people of New York," Etemadi said. "But otherwise everyone would have forgotten about Afghanistan."

Mumtaz Soleman, another volunteer from Laguna Niguel, nodded. "I believe those people died for my country."

It took two days of flying to travel from Los Angeles to Kabul. The anticipation built every mile. Finally, as we approached the capital, the Afghans crowded against the windows with cameras, catching the first glimpse of snow-capped mountains and low, earthen walls. Etemadi wiped away tears. Soleman just stared.

"I am trying to save my energy," she said. "So I can scream so loud the mountains can hear me."

Driving through Kabul, we passed minarets with no mosques, homes with no roofs, telephone poles with no phone lines. Incinerated automobiles dotted the shoulder like dead beetles on a windowsill.

Afghanistan has the surrealistic touches of a post-apocalyptic economy. A shoeshine boy makes more money in a month than a government minister. The sturdiest buildings are metal cargo containers, which line the side of the road like a strip mall out of Dante.

Khalili, oddly, seemed not to notice. Driving by a small field filled with burned-out cars, he spotted a young couple walking together. From the expression on their faces, they could have been going to work, but Khalili exploded with joy.

"That is democracy!" he cried. "A boy and a girl out to have a good time!"

It didn't exactly look like a garden spot, and they weren't holding hands, but Khalili could be forgiven his enthusiasm. Compared to the Taliban, under which women were forbidden to leave the house without wearing a burka, this was revolutionary. Progress is a matter of perspective. Later, one of our cab drivers would remark on just how different things were, marveling that he was able to ferry a group of foreign women. Once, during Taliban rule, he was arrested for taking two women he did not know to the hospital. The women were led away, their fate unknown. To punish the driver, they removed two of his teeth with pliers. In appreciation of better days, he gave us a toothless smile.

Still, the physical hardship of the country is hard to take. No part of Afghanistan was spared the devastation that accompanied two decades of war. Rival *mujahidin* factions leveled whole neighborhoods in their attacks.

The Soviets dropped nearly 30 million mines, turning farming into a literal game of Russian roulette. Not that there was much to farm, besides opium. The Taliban rule coincided with a ruinous four-year drought, and the streets of Kabul are choked with dust.

Only this year did rain fall, and the Kabul River, though trash-filled, flows again. Like so much in Afghanistan, the river is hope one cannot yet drink.

The next morning, Khalili woke early to prepare for the ARO's first charity stop, Jalalabad. He stopped kneading his yellow prayer beads long enough to dial a cell phone. "I am calling to make arrangements for guns and lunch," he said.

Hours later, both secured, we bounced along the narrow, treacherous route east, two young men with Kalasnikovs ensconced in the back. Khalili was in a fine mood, singing Afghan ballads while the car heaved over unpaved roads and sliced through fog-like dust. After one particularly cavernous pothole, he turned and smiled. "I think it will take a couple months to rebuild Afghanistan, what do you think?"

Khalili battles despair with a dark sense of humor. Driving through Kabul's gridlocked streets one afternoon, he cast me a glance. "You want me to kill someone and you film it? Only \$100. The only thing cheap here is blood."

Afghanistan today is a patchwork of military fiefdoms, most of which have pledged fidelity to the U.S.-backed central government, even if they have yet to disarm. Jalalabad has both a governor, Din Muhammad, and a "defense minister," Hazrat Ali. Each rules his own militia, and though they don't necessarily trust each other, or the government, they maintain an uneasy peace for the peripheral glances of the American forces. Khalili must, however, deal with each warlord. He couldn't just arrive at the intended destination, a tent school at the foothills of the Tora Bora mountains. First he had to meet Haji Mossa, one of Ali's commanders, who must necessarily provide security for his trip. As a gesture of goodwill, Mossa offered a couple of pickup trucks full of men carrying rifles and rocket-propelled grenades. Even if the ARO didn't need them, it was wise to accept them.

Haji Mossa is a huge man, riding in the back of an air-conditioned Toyota Land Cruiser and screaming profanities at his men through a walkie-talkie. Though the U.S. aims to replace his forces with a Afghan army now in training, Mossa still seems a little unclear on the concept. "We are already prepared for any kind of conflict that can happen," he said confidently.

Arriving at the Tora Bora school, Mossa's men set up a perimeter and the ARO members started unloading the donations. The children sat dutifully in their make-shift classes, the girls in vibrant head scarves, the boys with dirty faces.

The children showed off their English and Farsi for the foreign visitors, then lined up for their gifts. The ARO had stuffed plastic bags with notebooks, pens and calculators. Until now, the youth were learning to write with nothing to write on, learning to read with no books. Each child also received a large bag of rice and flour, enough to feed their families for a few weeks.

The tiny third graders struggled with the bags of grain, and I felt so guilty that I helped a pair of the young girls carry them. As they lead me farther away from the school, my knowledge of four Farsi words is little help in figuring out how long this will take -- or how far we are going. Worse, no one sees me leave.

Khalili warned the group that even though much of Afghanistan feels safe today, danger lurks just outside your perception. Large parts of the countryside have yet to be de-mined, and just before we arrived in Jalalabad, a bomb killed two guards in a local militia compound. Distant explosions would rattle our windows at night. Most foreign volunteers, even the peacekeepers, never see violence in Afghanistan. But that doesn't mean it isn't there.

The girls walk farther off the main road, across barren, rocky fields. Rural compounds dot the flat plains, mud walls that keep livestock -- and wives and daughters -- hidden inside. Standing citadel were the gray Tora Bora mountains. Finally, the children reach their front gate, and I drop their bags and run back. Khalili is wringing his hands, as angry and relieved as a fretful parent. "Never, ever ...," he said, and shoves me into the truck.

A few minutes later, after his anger subsided, Khalili started laughing. He looked at me and shook his head. He waved in the general direction of the foothills. "That is where Osama Bin Laden lived," he said, and smacked me on the head.

Khalili is an iconoclast from a tribe of iconoclasts. He is the descendant of Safi Pashtuns, a tribe that hails from a northwest region of Afghanistan that used to be called Kafiristan, or "land of the unbelievers."

They were proud, atheistic people, sheltered in remote mountains for centuries. It was not until 1895 that an Afghan amir finally conquered Kafiristan and converted the people to Islam. The region was renamed Nuristan, or "the land of light." Khalili's people took the name Safi, which means rag, to indicate their souls had been cleansed.

The Safis never lost their stubbornness, however, and neither did Khalili. His father, who worked for the ministry of energy, died in an accident when the boy was only six. Khalili was sent to live with, and cause trouble for, his grandfather, Khalilullah Khalili, then ambassador to Iraq.

When he was 16, Khalili told his grandfather that he wanted to forge his own path. He would go to Austria to work and attend a university. His grandfather lobbied against it.

"Go back to your own country for school. Or stay in Baghdad," he said. Khalili wouldn't listen.

"Well, if your plan doesn't work, don't come back," his grandfather said. Khalili was given \$400 as a going-away gift. "That was a lot of money," he recalled. "But in the first month, I am out with friends drinking the beers, and the money is all gone."

He got a job, handing out schedules at the university for five schillings an hour. But since he spoke no German, and he didn't have any savings, he couldn't pay his rent. Finally, he called his grandfather, "you were right, I want to come home to Baghdad." At first, his grandfather stood firm. "But I said, 'OK, if I die, it is on your hands,'" Khalili said, smiling. "In 24 hours, he sent me a plane ticket."

Khalili mellowed a bit, married, and went on the Hajj to Mecca, one of the pillars of the Islamic faith. Other Afghans use the honorific "Haji" for him, and Khalili is aware of the responsibilities that entails. If he has a drink, he told me conspiratorially, he never does it in front of other Muslims.

Though he considers himself a proper Muslim, Khalili remains suspicious of the overly pious.

"All the countries in the Middle East have one problem: The fundamentalist problem," he said. "I'm not a member of a political party. I am just believing in freedom. Go with women, talk with them, laugh with them, no problem."

"I believe in God, yes. The world, it was created by someone," Khalili added. "I also believe if you do something bad, it is God who sees it. It is between you and God."

In the 1970s, communists overthrew Afghanistan's monarchy, and the Soviet Union, afraid of losing a nascent satellite, invaded to prop up the government. Islamic rebels, the *mujahidin*, backed by the U.S. through Pakistan, founded a decade-long resistance movement.

Khalili's grandfather, who was later named poet laureate of Afghanistan, moved to Pakistan and wrote propaganda for the *mujahidin*. Khalilullah Khalili's verse, which has been published in the U.S., remains some of the most evocative of the times:

*In every state, the Heart is my support:
In this kingdom of existence it is my sovereign.
When I tire of the treachery of Reason?
God knows I am grateful to my Heart*

But Abulfazel Khalili was not a poet. He did not enjoy politics, and didn't fancy himself a fighter. It was only after he moved as a refugee to the United States, in 1980, that other skills emerged. Khalili was an excellent organizer, and started building a network of

Afghans both in the U.S. and abroad. As today, he is someone who gave to others, while he rarely improved himself.

Abdul Satar remembers arriving in Southern California in 1988, fresh from living as a refugee in Pakistan and bewildered by his new home. He went to a picnic for Afghan immigrants and met Khalili, who was taking new arrivals under his wing.

"He took me to his work, helped me get a job, gave me some of his hours," Satar said. I asked him what the job was, and Satar, who holds a degree in engineering, became embarrassed. "Valet parking."

But Satar's journey was the classic immigrant story. He went to night school, learned English, and was hired by the University of Southern California as a telecommunications manager. He bought a house in Buena Park. "Everyone has opportunity here," Satar said. "You have to work hard, but no one will stop you because of who you are, or who your family is. The only person who can stop you is yourself."

But Khalili did not work his way up. He helped others get jobs, yet, to this day, he still works as a valet attendant or shuttle-bus driver. Satar, though indebted for all the help Khalili gave him, was a little mystified by his lack of ambition. "I couldn't really understand it," Satar said.

It was only in the closing days of the Soviet war that Khalili was inspired to do something more. Seeing an opportunity to finally revisit his native land, he signed on to an aid mission in 1989. When he arrived in an earthquake-ravaged village, Khalili had an awakening.

"What I saw ...," he said, and shook his head. For the first time since I met him, Khalili was speechless.

Once back in the U.S., he immediately made plans to return, contacting his large network of Afghan-American friends for donations. Suddenly the elasticity of his employment became an asset, not a burden. Before he travels to Afghanistan, he works as a security guard at nights, and drives a shuttle bus on weekends, to save up enough money for his wife and two daughters while he's gone.

"Sometimes I work as a guard, sometimes a driver," Khalili said. "Then I leave for two months and they are telling me, 'Bye.'"

While his grandfather fought with words, and cousins with rifles, Khalili battled with bags of grain and video cameras. He sent tapes of the Taliban's human rights violations to the State Department and gave speeches to U.S. aid groups.

Khalili became so prominent that when the new Afghan government took power, he was offered a position that he quickly declined.

"I don't like to be part of government. I don't like to lie," he said. Khalili also intends to remain in the United States, where he became a citizen five years ago. "I don't want to work for another government, because I already swore to one."

More to the point, Khalili feels he can do more good outside the bureaucracy than inside - and have more power in America than in Afghanistan.

"I hate politics because sometimes they are in power, sometimes not," he said. "I like to help people all the time."

Khalili's new role has earned him the respect of his family. After the Jalalabad trip, he took the group to see his uncle, Masood Khalili, who lets the ARO use his property in Kabul. Over tea, Masood Khalili explained how his nephew went from black sheep to shepherd.

"He'd look lazy, but his heart is honest," Masood Khalili said. "In the mountains during the time of the Taliban, I was proud of him. He is on the right path."

While Khalili was delivering relief supplies to northern villages during the civil war, Masood Khalili was an adviser to Massoud, the Northern Alliance commander who fought the Taliban to a standstill. Assassinated by Al Qaeda, Massoud became an iconic figure, like Che in Cuba or Ataturk in Turkey. Massoud's face adorns the wall of almost every home and office in Afghanistan, along with the tortured English phrase: "Your Way Move Forward."

"We had a great leader, Afghanistan had a great leader," Masood Khalili said. "We'd talk for hours and then, in one sentence, he'd summarize it all and give me good instruction. This was a man with just a high school education. He was generous as the sea, as kind as the sun, but as humble as the Earth."

On Sept. 9, 2001, Masood Khalili and Massoud stayed up talking and reading from the Sufi poet Hafiz.

"I opened the book for him and there was a beautiful verse," Masood Khalili explained.

*"Many nights will come
Many days will follow
Many years after that
But you two will not see each other again on a night like this."*

"The next morning around ten he came to my room," Masood Khalili continued. "My passport was lying on the bed. He told me to put my passport in my shirt pocket.

"We went to the river that divides central Asia and Afghanistan, the Amu Darya. He told me two Arabs were there for an interview. ... We went in and he was on my left. The cameraman was in front of us. I remember the pious smile of the photographer ..."

Masood Khalili paused for a moment.

"And after five minutes he died and I survived."

The Arabs, envoys from Osama bin Laden, had a bomb hidden in the camera. Masood Khalili's passport, which was covered in leather, stopped eight pieces of shrapnel from entering his heart. "God saved me, but always God is helped by some means," he said.

Masood Khalili woke in Germany, where doctors worked on him for more than a week. He lost most of the vision in his right eye. His kidney was threatened by shrapnel. "I thought I'd die. I told my family, 'Don't fight on my behalf. I have forgiven them. Don't remember when I die, remember why I die. The Taliban, Osama and Pakistan did it. Those two boys did not do it.'

"Whenever you fight for the right cause, if you die, you don't die. But if you fight for the wrong cause, you never live," Masood Khalili said.

When Abulfazel Khalili heard about the explosion that nearly claimed his uncle's life, he made arrangements to return to Afghanistan immediately. But the next day, terrorists attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and Khalili was forced to wait.

Finally, one month after 9/11, Khalili arrived in Tajikistan and, along with a number of Western journalists, crossed the border to rendezvous with the Northern Alliance. He followed them to Mazar-i-Sharif and other cities, acting as a liaison and translator for foreign aid groups. Because of his connections and position, Khalili was able to put relief goods in Afghan hands as soon as they were liberated.

As the Taliban fell, Khalili followed the Northern Alliance south, ending up in the same narrow pass that would later trap the ARO. Since no cars could travel through the Salang Tunnel, which burrows through the mountains at 11,000 feet, he walked through on foot.

"I kept having to move the flashlight from one hand to the other ... oohh!" Khalili says, and pantomimed juggling his hands against frostbite.

During Khalili's long, cold journey, ARO members in the U.S. were gathering \$600,000 in relief supplies. Oregon-based Evergreen Airlines agreed to carry the goods, and an Afghan pilot volunteered for the mission. The flight landed only weeks after the U.S. bombs stopped falling, and was the first commercial plane to land in Kabul Airport after the U.S. invasion.

Khalili met the plane in Kabul. Then he went to the Marco Polo restaurant in the center of the city, where men were just beginning to venture outside without beards or turbans. "I told them, 'Sing,'" Khalili said. "'Sing anything you want, but sing.'"

As he told this story, more than a year later, Khalili kept one eye on a fuzzy television broadcasting the Iraq war. Afghanistan, he lamented, doesn't have the resources of Iraq. It will take far longer to rebuild his country, he said.

"They have two rivers, and dates. They have oil, they have factories," Khalili said. "Now that freedom is there, it is going to grow very fast." Khalili said his next trip was going to be to Iraq, to start a business that makes money for Afghanistan. "I grew up there, I know. My Arabic is better than my English."

He turned back to the television and got quiet. "Saddam is a very, very bad man. Freedom is good for everybody, not just Afghans," Khalili said. "This bombing, it is the right thing. If I'm crying for one week, it doesn't matter, if I am happy for a hundred years."

As soon as Khalili returned to California after the Evergreen mission, he planned his next trip to Afghanistan. With the new, U.S.-backed government, he would enjoy more freedom of movement, and be able to get materials to everywhere but the border of Pakistan, where U.S. troops still hunt members of Al Qaeda. In that first year, Afghanistan changed radically. Refugees poured back into Kabul, and the population tripled to 3 million in mere months. The influx of foreign aid groups and Afghans from Europe and the U.S. created a real estate bubble. Home prices in safer neighborhoods rival those in Orange County -- a half-million dollars for a house that needs a generator for electricity.

Only through Khalili's connections were the ARO members able to pay a reasonable rent on a home in a street patrolled by a private police force.

In between aid missions, the women would organize the donations, meet with various ministers and see what was left of the country they remembered. It isn't much. Unemployment is rampant, and war widows, forbidden to marry after their husbands have died, wander the streets in filthy blue burkas.

They would circle the car and tap on the windows, making a feeble whining sound that tested even the most resolute.

"It reminds me of that Michael Jackson video, 'Thriller'" Etemadi said. "All those people surrounding you -- all those dead souls."

The school supplies and clothes the ARO collected were stored in a gray shipping container in the warehouse district. Between excursions to cities surrounding Kabul, the volunteers would put together plastic bags for each student. Sifting through the donations always drew a crowd.

One of the locals, Farhad, was put to work lifting boxes, and was given a jean jacket as a reward. Though it was two sizes too big, and horribly out of fashion by California standards, Farhad strutted over to his friends, all young men in their twenties, with a huge smile on his face. "This jacket makes me look like a millionaire," he said.

The others hovered nearby as damaged clothes were discarded. When Etemadi gave the signal, the pack snatched everything in seconds, almost ripping the fabric apart. As we drove away, the men picked through our garbage.

The days ate at the women and invaded their nights. Mumtaz Soleman reflexively touched the head of every child she met; "I wish I could collect them all and bring them back with me." Etemadi, plagued by insomnia, woke early every morning and walked the city, giving money to the poor.

One afternoon, when the poverty of the city was too much to take, Khalili and the women drove north into the countryside, revisiting places where they would go on picnics as children. They pointed out once teeming villages, now crumbling ruins, like ancient cities populated 5,000 years ago and not five. Yet the drought has subsided; the mountains were luminescent with snow, and mine hunters, surreally resplendent in turquoise body armor, moved silently through tall green grass.

Soon, brilliant red and purple tulips filled the horizon, and Khalili cried out for the driver to stop. The women scooped the flowers in bunches, put them in their hair, breathed deep the wind. For a moment, all the nation's problems seemed far away.

Then cars from the opposite direction honked, the passengers pointing frantically at the side of the road. The rocks there were painted red, a sign that the pasture had yet to be checked. The tulips blossomed in a minefield.

The last delivery of the trip was to Charikar, a small village north of Kabul. The school was a cluster of mud huts, with the only light coming from the doorways. The children sat knee-to-knee in the dank rooms, their bathroom a hole in the ground. The young girls were reduced to shy laughter at the sight of us.

The ARO women walked through the classes, giving each child a blue plastic bag. The girls stared at the calculators like artifacts from some alien civilization. Khalili smiled. They would learn how to use them eventually.

In gratitude, the third graders demonstrated their new-found education, reading their lessons and singing. One girl, with eyes of pale green apophyllite, rose to read an essay. "God bless America," she said. "Please don't leave us again."

It was hard to leave Charikar. The children crowded around the foreigners, laughing and playing. Mumtaz Soleman threw candy into the air and kids all scattered to catch it. Others, fascinated by the cameras, kept jostling to have their picture taken.

In Afghanistan, despondence is the default emotion. But in their young faces, the situation did not seem so hopeless. Here, in this moment, was the reward for all the work. By dealing with warlords, maybe the ARO would ensure that these children would not fight for one. By teaching them math and science, the students wouldn't farm opium or

live on the streets. By showing them women who traveled without their husbands, the girls were learning to be independent.

Here was the glimmer of possibilities. Perhaps these children would grow up knowing a better life.

It was at these moments that every Afghan-American felt the tug, that urge to return permanently. It would be a hard life, coming back to Afghanistan, but one where every small gesture changed someone's life. It was the reason that Khalili, even after the rest of the ARO returned to Orange County, stayed in Afghanistan to arrange the delivery of more donations. As of last week, he was still there.

"You cannot say you live in Kabul and love it," Masood Khalili had said. "I wish it were true. It's not become alien yet, but it is hard. Reality is reality. We have to change ourselves then. If one out of ten can come back, we'll survive, this country. We lost so many beautiful flowers, we should not lose the garden. If we fail this time, we shall lose the garden.

"The whole history of this country gives you nothing but one candle," he added, "and that is hope."

It was after that brief trip to Mazar-i-Sharif, trapped in a rain storm in the Salang Pass, when even that candle dimmed for Khalili. Miserable and apprehensive, he apologized to the women and cursed the guides. Sitting in the mud hut of the villagers, he even scoffed at their hospitality.

"Without the guards, they probably would have robbed us," he muttered.

Early in the morning, we walked the rest of the way to the road and hired taxis back to Kabul. Freezing, tired, annoyed, Khalili ranted to himself.

"This country ... I hate this country!" he cried. "Nothing works, it is animal, this country! I am never coming back. This is the last time."

Then he glanced at me, his glasses sliding down his nose, and I knew he was kidding.

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