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Women's eNews

War Crimes Amnesty Adds to Afghan Women's Grief

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Afghanistan's amnesty for war criminals is not playing well in a therapy theater group for Kabul women victimized by years of violence. They wait for a form of justice while perpetrators of violence get impunity and a chance to hold positions of power.



KABUL - On a makeshift stage on a small verandah of a ramshackle house in Kabul,

four women stand together in front of an audience of more than 50 women who are gathered in the courtyard of the house. Three of the actresses play the parts of women: a matriarch and her two daughters-in-law. The fourth plays a disabled son.

The production is part of the women's attempts to come to peace with what they have experienced in their strife-torn nation. Yet, a new realization that those who raped and otherwise maimed and murdered them and members of their families now will receive total amnesty in perpetuity may add even more of a sense of unresolved grief.

Its plot: With no able men to hold down a job, the family is reduced to penury and discord. The story ends with the disabled son joining the Taliban in return for money.

The situation is familiar to both the actors and the audience, all women from some of the poorest neighborhoods of Kabul who have lost a family member or suffered brutal violence in the successive waves of fighting and the regime change from the Soviet-installed government to the anti-Soviet mujahideen and the Taliban.

Some of these women have survived rape, according to some rights workers here, but little public mention is made of that due to the heavy social taboo that can turn rape victims into social outcasts.

The participatory theater is organized by the Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization. The group, based in Kabul, works with victims of the Afghan conflict and is a member of a coalition of civil society groups advocating a transitional justice program. Theater of Transformation.

The theatricals call on the women to take on one of the roles in a familiar societal drama and transform it. Based on theories of social psychotherapy, the goal is to internalize a sense of civil rights and to heal wounds. Before the staging, the women go through a workshop about the social influence of theater and taking the performances into their communities.

"Most of the women suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder," said Dr. Neak Mohammed Sharif, a member of the Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization. Sharif says the project draws on the Theatre of the Oppressed, pioneered by Augusto Boal of Brazil.

None of the women in the production last week wanted to play the part of the Taliban insurgent. Several said a Taliban character would be too rigid and unchangeable.

The women associated with the drama group come from the neighborhoods of Chilsitoon and Dasht-e-Barchi, which were caught in the crosshairs of the violence unleashed on the city between 1992 and 1996 as commanders of political factions fought for control of Kabul.

Since 2006 they have been waiting for the Afghan government's promise to implement a

transitional justice program intended to help women such as themselves. The phrase transitional justice refers to a process that seeks recognition for victims while promoting possibilities for peace, reconciliation and democracy. Afghanistan's plan included removing human rights abusers from positions of power. The deadline for implementation passed in March 2009.

Quiet Forgiveness of War Crimes

Instead, in a development that caught the world off guard, the government earlier this year announced it had adopted an amnesty law as far back as November 2008, a fact it had kept under wraps until now. The amnesty is in perpetuity for all combatants, including war criminals and those who committed rape. The women here expect it to include some of the military commanders of the 1992-1996 violence.

"Who is [Afghanistan's president] Karzai to forgive the deaths in my family?" said Sakina, a middle-aged widow from Dasht-e-Barchi, a poor neighborhood of west Kabul. She lost her husband and niece in the conflict. "He wants to give the Taliban money, land and privileges. To me, a victim, he gives me a widow's pension of 300 Afs (\$6) a month. Karzai says he will forgive the Taliban? Who gave him this right?"

In 2007, Parliament introduced a law to prevent the prosecution of individuals responsible for large-scale human rights abuses. The bill produced widespread outcry and rights groups and international donors thought it was dropped.

Earlier this year, however, it came to light that the law been adopted quietly at some point in 2008. It says all those engaged in hostilities before the formation of an interim government in December 2001 shall "enjoy all their legal rights and shall not be prosecuted;" it also promises the same immunity to all those currently involved in hostilities if they lay down their arms and adhere to the constitution.

The coalition of groups calling for implementation of the transitional justice program passed a resolution earlier this month calling for a repeal of the amnesty law.

Meanwhile, the government is preparing to hold a peace meeting during the first two days in May, which will include clerics, community leaders and elders and is designed to bring current armed insurgents back into civic life.

Many women here see the meeting as a chance for perpetrators of violence to join the government and hold positions of power, with no accountability and no punishment.