

WOMEN IN POLITICS

Afghanistan's Ambassador sees progress

By Andy Carling

Attending a round table, organised by the East West Institute, Afghanistan's Ambassador to Nordic countries, Manizha Bakhtari spoke to New Europe.

How would you describe the status of women in Afghanistan?

Now, there are a lot of opportunities for women to express themselves in political and social life. Women are no longer invisible in public life.

With the Taliban they were confined to their houses, but now many girls are going to school and thousands of women are active in civil society. We have come a long way.

What will happen to women if the Taliban are brought into government?

That's a kind of political solution. We have discovered that we cannot solve our problems by military activities, so there is a need for a political solution. Negotiation with the Taliban is something we have offered the Taliban, but we have conditions. One is our modern constitution that is based on human rights and international values, so if the Taliban want to be part of government, they must accept the constitution, then there will be no problem. There are many concerns about these negotiations and there are no guarantees for women's status, but I think the Afghan government is fully honest about



Friendly soccer match between Afghan women soccer team and ISAF | EPA/S. SABAWOON

women's rights. I ask why the international community is in Afghanistan? One reason is because of women's rights.

Do you think the Afghan government is honest about anything else? We've heard many stories, including people carrying \$32 million on their person

That was revealed by WikiLeaks and I've no comment. The accused says he didn't do it

and there will be an investigation.

There are longstanding concerns about corruption, including that of the Electoral Commission, but you're painting a very positive picture

We are a war shattered country that is transferring to a democracy and I think corruption is a factor in all countries with a transitional period like ours. There is corruption, but it

doesn't mean that the government doesn't want to stop corruption. We are taking measures and have a very active anti-corruption unit. Corruption is everywhere in the world.

The argument is that the west has flooded the country with large amounts of money, with little checking on who or what is getting it. Is that part of the corruption problem?

Yes. I think that we can't just blame the Afghan government for corruption, the international community has some responsibility. Whenever they start a big project, there is a large amount for their logistics, salaries and so on. Corruption also means this, and the corruption in the international community is wider than in the Afghan government.

Whilst helping remove the Taliban, NATO has also been responsible for a large number of civilian casualties

First, I would like to say that I appreciate NATO's role in Afghanistan, they have helped us and we will not forget them. The other side of this, is the number of civilian casualties and we have discussed this with them many times, that our people do not tolerate civilian casualties. Why does this happen? It is because of poor coordination and misinformation and misunderstanding. For this reason, we want to hand all security responsibility to us as soon as possible. When we lead operations against anti-government forces, I think we can reduce the civilian casualties.

WOMEN IN POLITICS

Lawmakers quota opens doors for Pakistan women

By Andy Carling

There has been a quiet revolution in Pakistan's politics, with the introduction of a quota system to guarantee female representation in the National Assembly. Dr Donya Aziz, spoke about the system.

What challenges do women face in politics?

There have been many constraints on women entering into politics. This is why in 2002 the affirmative action plan was put in place, which reserved 60 seats for women in the National Assembly and 17 in the Senate.

Unfortunately, fighting elections is an expensive business and it has been male dominated for most of our history and parties have found it better to spend the money on male candidates. That's the reality, but we do have some great examples, such as Benazir Bhutto, the first woman to be elected as a Prime Minister of a Muslim country and our neighbouring countries have had powerful women as heads of state.

Have you had problems from traditionalists or fundamentalists?

In the last parliament, we never had any problems with them. You may think, in the West, that they would try to hinder us but they were all very nice. They might not have been sup-



A worker of Pakistan Election Commission marks a voter at a polling station during by-elections for a seat of the national assembly (Lower House of parliament) in Rawalpindi, Pakistan on 24 February 2010. | EPA/STR

portive of women's issues, but that was their own parties perspective.

In the West, the stories that are more horrific that make it into the media and therefore there is a tainted view of how Islam treats women or how women are treated and, for the most part, women aren't held back by religious reasons. We have very dynamic women, who are not only in politics, but in the armed forces, flying fighter jets. It's really

amazing to see women coming up now.

What has been the practical response to the quotas?

After we came into parliament, it almost instantaneously changed the social fabric in Pakistan. Traditionally, medicine and teaching were the professions for women who went to college. Since so many women and young girls saw us in politics, many other professions have

opened up, such as journalism, not just behind desks, but reporting, even from conflicts like Lebanon. You wouldn't see that ten years ago. The first Pakistani in space is going to be a woman, she's training now with NASA! It's amazing how opening the door for women has opened the door for them in almost every field.

What do you want to see happen next?

I would like to see, is Pakistani women really seizing this opportunity that they have and excel in their professions and make themselves indispensable.

How long will you need the quota system?

Probably a generation. With women's rights issues, in any country, it's hard to take one step forward and very easy to take ten steps back, so we would like to see it ingrained in a generation.

Do you see a regional network of female representatives?

It wasn't until I went to New York for a meeting that I met a female Afghan legislator, even though they are next door. The speaker of the Pakistan Assembly, the first woman Speaker in the Muslim world is setting up a women's caucus and she has encouraged other regional states to do the same and I would like to see this grow into a regional group.