



16 May 2008

**VUSAF**  
**Union of Assistance**  
**for Schools in Afghanistan**

***Marga Flader und Heike Essayie reporting from their trip to Afghanistan in April/Mai 2008***

Dear Friends

This spring we travelled to Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif (province of Balkh), Andkhoi (Province of Faryab) and Aibak (Province of Samangan) to visit to our projects and to have personal discussions. Although we exchange mails almost daily and can also speak on the telephone, we felt that the personal contact was so important that we travelled to Afghanistan despite the deteriorating security. In retrospect we are very grateful for the many meetings, exchanges and mutual suggestions. Our friends looked after us better than ever. Their commitment impressed us very much and motivated us to continue our work.

We were very busy especially during our stay in the north of Afghanistan. We had very many discussions with all our staff – one meeting following the next from 8 o'clock in the morning till 8 o'clock at night. We were expected to visit all home schools, sewing courses, English and computer and preparatory, classes which unfortunately was impossible although we visited the first course at 6.30 hrs. in the morning. Some important decisions had to be taken, especially setting priorities for new projects. We also had to discuss some points with regard to the running projects, for example about additional books for the library, about the new laboratory, about the future of our carpentry workshop and about starting electricity training, about including commercial training into the curriculum of our education centre, about changing the place of some sewing courses and, last but not least, the future of the “Andkhoi Magazine”, the only magazine in Andkhoi.

We were very impressed by the work of our Education Centre. Here students are preparing for university and attend English and computer courses. Many people come here to make use of the library. Teachers elsewhere might be envious to have such clever, curious students ready for learning, especially those who are members of the students' council. This year, 35 students have passed the entry test for university; most of them were students of our Education Centre. The head of education for the province whom we met in our centre would very much like to have such a centre in Maimana, the provincial capital.

Still very popular are the sewing courses and the courses which we have set up in the private homes of teachers for girls and women who have not had a chance to attend school. Most girls want to attend both. In one such home course we met a mother with her two daughters who wanted to refresh the knowledge which she had acquired many years ago.

We visited the construction projects together with our competent supervisor who manages to surprise us again and again. For example, the Aigambirdi boys' school needed some additional classrooms. We had planned to construct 5 but he managed to build 7 within the budget limit. However, there are also some problems. The ground for the Kulalkhana Girls' School is soft and we needed to dig very deep and replace the soft soil which will increase the construction costs for the foundation of the additional building. The Yuldoz Girls' School is getting 8 new classrooms this year. It is still the only school where girls can study up to grade 12 and has around 3000 students. We are also building a school for girls and boys in the province of Samangan. We visited the existing small school and also the construction site. We hope that the 500 students will be able to move into the new building still this year.

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**Address:** Deefenallee 21, D -22113 Oststeinbek  
**Honorary Principal:** Ursula Nölle, Tel. 040 712 24 17  
**Principal:** Marga Flader, Tel. 040 / 712 24 67, 0160 581 3473, [Flader@Afghanistan-Schulen.de](mailto:Flader@Afghanistan-Schulen.de)  
**Address::** Heike Essayie, Blakshörn 19, D-22159 Hamburg, Tel. +4940 6440485, [h.essayie@gmx.de](mailto:h.essayie@gmx.de)  
**Internet:** [www.Afghanistan-Schulen.de](http://www.Afghanistan-Schulen.de)

**New Projects:** Some of the students of the Khoja Abdullah Ansari Primary School in Chooghdak/Mazar-i-Sharif have to take their lessons outside – despite the heat and dust. We built this school for people returning from the refugee camps in Pakistan in 2003 but the building is now not big enough for the 1000 students anymore. The wonderful headmaster is trying very hard to provide good tuition and also organises teacher training. We hope we will manage to obtain the necessary funds for the second floor of the school building.

Another important project is the extension of the agricultural vocational school in Mazar-i-Sharif. Considering the dramatic situation of agriculture in Afghanistan we think it is urgently needed to train more than the present 210 girls and boys. Many students would like to join this school but first more classrooms have to be built. Also a dormitory is needed because the students come from many different parts from the neighbouring provinces. At present groups of around 20 young men are sleeping in bunk beds in small rooms and others are sleeping and studying in tents in the school grounds. We are also looking for financial support for this project.

And we have received further requests: In Qipchok (District of Andkhoi) not only the students were waiting to greet us but also the elders of the village. Last year the community had provided the land for a new school and had erected two small mud buildings. But that is not enough. The rooms are very small; one did not even have a roof. There is not enough space for tables and benches. Children, their teachers and the elders hope that we will build a "proper" school but there is no money yet.

We had expected to see some fresh green and a desert full of spring flowers like two years ago, but instead there was dust and sand and in Andkhoi the river bed was dry. The winter with extremely low temperatures around -25°C did not bring much snow and the spring only little rain. The water reservoirs which are normally full at this time of the year were nearly empty. As there will be water in the river and ditches again only in November, it seems that we have to expect a catastrophe. It seems very like that hardly anything will be harvested. And as there is almost no grass for the sheep and goats, the animals are sold at a fraction of their value.

Further problems result from sharply rising prices for food supplies. The price for a loaf of bread has doubled within a short period of time: from 10 AFA to 20 AFA. A family of 8 to 10 needs about 20 loaves, i.e. 400 AFA for bread alone. Considering that a teacher gets a salary of 3000 to 6000 AFA you can imagine that a state employee cannot feed his family from this income alone. In many parts of the country the teachers were on strike while we were in Kabul. [Meanwhile the lowest salary was increased to 5000 AFA and the strike was called off]. The heads of education combined their thanks for our winter help projects (hats, scarves and socks for 24.000 children and food – rice, flour, oil – for 1200 school staff) with the request for further food help. However, the biggest worry is the worsening security in the whole country because it effects their daily life.

It is only thanks to our hard working and reliable staff in Afghanistan that we managed to carry on with our projects and do them well! It seems that our contact has intensified during this trip. They are working independently and take on the responsibility. When – at the end of our trip – we talked about security, one of our staff members said: "Our biggest enemy is illiteracy. We have to fight that".

We want to continue our support to the people in Afghanistan and ask you to help us.

Kind regards

Marga Flader

Heike Essayie

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**Account for Donations:**  
**Account Holder: Afghanistan-Schulen e.V.**  
**IBAN DE37200505501008225805**  
**SWIFT CODE HASPDEHH**  
**Bank: Hamburger Sparkasse, Adolphsplatz, D-20355 Hamburg**