

Epic Journey to End Cycle of War

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An Afghan is cycling from Nangarhar to New York to tell the world it isn't doing enough about his country.

When 35-year-old Nadir Shah told his mother in Nangarhar province that he planned to ride his bicycle from Afghanistan to New York, she fainted. Friends and family warned him he would end up injured, if not dead.

After six months on the highways of Asia and Europe, Nadir rode into London in early January 2003. A short, athletic man with sparkling eyes and a neat moustache, he plans to visit the site of the World Trade Centre in Manhattan before ending his bicycle odyssey at the UN headquarters.

Speaking in a soft monotone, he told IWPR why he's doing it. "I want to tell the world they must not forget Afghanistan like they did before.

"I am upset by what I see back home. The schools don't have basic facilities, most people travel for days to see a doctor and public transport is non-existent outside Kabul. We're hard-working people but we've had twenty years of war. If you ignore us, we will not recover."

Nadir Shah admits his journey would not have been possible before US intervention drew Afghanistan out of political isolation in 2001. He is grateful that unlike so many who left his country, he can be a traveller rather than a refugee.

However, his journey is intended as a message – if the West looks away again, Afghanistan will make refugees of its citizens once more.

The international community has had plenty to distract its attention from the helpful promises it made to Afghanistan's new president, Hamed Karzai, in the heady days after the fall of the Taleban.

President Bush's "war on terror", which began in the skies over Kabul, has moved elsewhere. US forces are gearing up for a campaign in Iraq, where the political and financial stakes are felt to be higher than they were in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, the continuing global economic downturn has caused almost all donors, from governments to aid agencies, to tighten their purse strings. Karzai has complained that much of the aid promised at the Tokyo summit on Afghan reconstruction early last year has yet to materialise.

Many Afghan officials also feel that what aid has arrived in their country has not been clearly allocated for reconstruction, and has yet to yield visible benefits. Rather than being entrusted to the new government, they claim the money remains in the hands of international agencies, which deploy it according to their whims.

At the heart of the aid problem is the vicious circle of stability and reconstruction. Karzai's has told the donors that stability can only be guaranteed after reconstruction. His credibility as a popular leader depends on him fulfilling the pledge to rebuild Afghanistan.

On the other hand, the donors believe reconstruction is futile until stability is guaranteed. International agencies and governments are not entirely convinced that Karzai has the clout to safeguard long-term investment in Afghanistan. Warlords still hold sway in the provinces and factionalism poses a continual threat to central authority.

Indeed, a Pashtun former governor of Nadir Shah's home province, Nangarhar, was assassinated in Kabul last year, shortly after being appointed deputy president. While Haji Qadeer's assailants have yet to be traced, observers point to a range of possible factors behind his killing – from his opium smuggling links to his rivalry with Tajik government officials.

The cyclist from Nangarhar knows exactly what to tell his people when he gets home. "I will cycle from village to village and explain to Afghans that they must give up the gun and take up the book, educate themselves.

"I have realised there is nowhere like Afghanistan in the world. Even going to our neighbour, Iran, I was struck by how advanced their cities are compared to Kabul."

Passing through Germany filled him with awe and hope, "I had read in the history books that Germany was destroyed in a great war. But all I saw there was prosperity and progress. Then I realised that there is

great hope for Afghanistan, that with Allah's will, we can build a great country."

Nadir Shah said he was equally struck by the lack of border controls within the EU, given that European nations have been at war twice in the last century, "I was six kilometres inside France before I realised I had crossed the border from Germany. In Afghanistan, I have to pass armed men and checkpoints just to get to the next village."

Western culture and couture also took him by surprise.

He laughs as he recalls seeing a man wearing ripped denims in Vienna. Wearing jeans was forbidden by the Taleban and those who defied them would often be flogged in public.

"I was shocked at the sight of this Austrian wearing such tattered jeans. Surely he must be very poor, I thought. So I gave him a pair of my trousers, which were very clean and not ripped in any way. Much later I found out it was some kind of fashion to wear ripped jeans."

He says he's enjoyed his travels and is grateful for the hospitality people have shown him. Equally, he looks forward to going back to his country and recovering from his titanic journey.

"I have lost six kilos in weight since I started cycling. The worst time was when I had to leave Paris during a storm. The wind was too strong and I had to walk with my bicycle for nearly six hours. It was like trying to pull a stubborn goat."

Neil Arun is an IWPR contributor.

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