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Afghan youth, US veterans teleconference

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Dec. 14, 2010 NCR Today

This is one of the effects of war, it makes people rough and violent.
--Afghan youth speaking during
Advent teleconference with a US veteran.

Every Sunday in Advent from 1-2 p.m. eastern time, Afghan youth and U.S. veterans have been sharing their experiences of war and occupation in a remarkable series of tele-conferences that are free and open to the public.

"Whose Children Are These? The Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers and American Veterans Share Their Stories" is the brainchild of Hosanna! Peoples Seminary (H!PS), a small group of social-justice-oriented Christians who are using new media to facilitate conversations among dispersed communities. The program?s sponsors are Christian Peace Witness and St. Mark?s in the Bowery, an Episcopal Church in New York?s Lower East.

The Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers was created in 2008 by Afghan college students and young boys from the region of Bamiyan, who felt motivated to begin a peace movement in Afghanistan. In 2009, the group attempted to organize a peace walk within their homeland. This year, the youth are networking internationally. Several months ago, they spoke, via teleconference, to teens in Gaza. During the Advent exchanges, they have been talking to members of Iraq Veterans Against the War, a different soldier each week. The discussions are facilitated by H!PS coordinator Mike Uca-Dorn who allots 10 minutes at the end of the hour for questions from other participants.

On Nov. 28, the boys talked to Bryan Casler, a marine of four years, who was deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, and then later co-founded a chapter of Iraq Veterans Against the War in Rochester, New York.

The conversation between the boys and the soldier is heartbreakingly candid. There are confessions, questions, expressions of solidarity and sympathy. For one brief hour, the divides of distance and circumstance are bridged.

Fourteen-year-old Zekerullah tells how his uncle?s death in battle while fighting with the Taliban, his body ?riddled with bullets,? led him to conclude ?war has no other result except the shedding of blood and the killing of people.? When Casler chokes up while expressing his gratitude and admiration for the boys? efforts, Zekerullah consoles the Marine. ?Don?t cry, Bryan,? he says. ?We feel privileged to know you have left the scene of war.?

Speaking through a translator, Casler explains how financial need rather than a sense of patriotic duty led him to the military. He describes his days in Kabul, the commanders who insisted the American soldiers always be on their guard against the Afghans, to always ?be aggressive.? He tells of befriending the Afghan gatekeepers at the U.S. Embassy where he kept guard. During the winter, the Marines stayed warm in heated guardhouses but his Afghan co-workers had to scrounge for scrap wood to build their own shelter.

?While the Afghans were freezing inside their huts, every day State Department officials and Blackwater hires would go through the front gate, each making several hundred thousand [dollars] themselves. For years, something as simple as this has haunted me,? he says.

The boys want to know how the war has affected Casler psychologically. One youth tells of being treated poorly at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, during a failed effort to obtain a visa, how he was looked at with disdain, talked down to, like he ?wasn?t a human being.?

?When you were in Afghanistan, did you ever see Afghans as human beings?? asks the youngest child.

The most poignant exchange occurs after one youth confides that whenever he sees foreign troops with all their armor go by, he feels as if his life has ?no value, no value at all.? The former marine resonates with the sentiment. As a soldier, he too felt, at times, he was less worth to the military than the weapon he carried.

Casler tells the boys ?those weapons cannot fire themselves, this equipment cannot work without people manning the machinery. We have to organize people. Sounds like you guys are already doing that.? He then urges the peace volunteers to keep making connections with other groups. ?If we can build these connections, we no longer have to feel powerless,? he says.

Listening to the talk, one thinks of the prophet?s visions ? the sword being turned into a plowshare; the lion laying down with the lamb ? and feels a sense of possibilities.

On Dec. 19, the boys speak with conscientious objector Joshua Stieber. To join the conversation or hear recordings of previous sessions, visit www.hopesem.org.

For more on the Afghan Youth Volunteers, visit www.ourjourneytosmile.com.

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