

The third Afghanistan Trip Report

"Do you have a father? "

(Question asked by a child at the Al Monbuhali orphanage)



The Al Monbuhali Orphan School (Jalalabad City, Nangarhar Province)

(Can you find three Japanese people in this photo?)

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All For One Ltd.

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In March 2006 I revisited Afghanistan, and was involved in a football friendship match between Japan and Afghanistan on the National Nangarhar University pitch in Jalalabad City, Nangarhar Province that was completed in 2004. Our group included three football enthusiasts and Keiko Nishigaki of the Takarazuka Afghanistan Friendship Association (TAFA). Originally, we planned the trip for November 2005 but were forced to delay due to the murder of a Japanese national in August.

Information reaching Japan about Afghanistan only focuses on “sensationalist” stories such as murder and terrorism. News of recovery and progress are largely ignored by the media, and so for many Japanese people Afghanistan is synonymous with danger.

Though there were moments of tension during the trip, we encountered no major accidents and completed our mission without incident.

I hope that through reading this report your image of Afghanistan will change and, seeing the potential of the country, will want to help the women and children of Afghanistan. Though lacking in written skills, I hope this report reflects some of the feelings I had during the trip.

Minoru Kato

Three Audacious Japanese Football Enthusiasts

Kazuhiro Koike (26) is a sports instructor from Kawaguchi, Saitama prefecture. He has experience of coaching Israeli and Palestinian children in Japan. The local kids called him “Kazu” and he enjoyed playing football with them in the local park each morning.



Tomonari Shimagaki (24), a medical student from Fukuoka, has been playing football since elementary school. Nicknamed “Tomo” he was surprised by the difference in hospitals between Japan and Afghanistan and hopes to become an excellent doctor that will be able to help the people of Japan.

Hirata Koki (21) a literature student from Takarazuka, Hyogo prefecture, took part in a national football tournament while still in elementary school. Living near Ms. Nishigaki, he has been actively involved in TAFE and his unique personality was a hit with the locals.



Destination: Jalalabad City, Nangarhar Province, Islamic State of Afghanistan (via Peshawar Pakistani)

Dates: 6-17 March 2006 (10 days, 12 nights)

Fellow participants:

Keiko Nishigaki-Takarazuka Afghanistan Friendship Assoc (TAFA)
Kazuhiro Koike (26)-sports instructor from Kawaguchi, Saitama prefecture

Tomonari Shimagaki (24)-a medical student from Fukuoka

Hirata Koki (21)-a literature student from Takarazuka, Hyogo prefecture

Objectives: To hold a football friendship match between Japan and Afghanistan, to plant a Japanese wild cherry tree and to visit an orphanage/ hospital

Exchange rate: \$1=¥119 (14 yen less than last time), Pakistan Rupees (PKR)=about ¥2 (0.2 yen higher than last time), 1 Afghani (AFA)=about ¥2.4 (0.1 yen less than last time). In Jalalabad, Pakistani Rupees are an accepted currency



When shopping we thought of PKR100 as roughly ¥200. When converting AFA to PKR, we multiplied by 1.2, so that AFA100 equaled PKR 120 (compared to our last trip, when AFA100 equaled PKR140). The exchange rate for Japanese Yen was extremely bad so we converted our currency to dollars in Japan, and then into PKR in Afghanistan. In Jalalabad, \$100=PKR 5,990 (compared to PKR5,950 last time). It was extremely confusing carrying four different currencies around and I had to keep a calculator

and notepad to hand while shopping.

Time difference: Afghanistan is 4.5 hours behind Japan

Population: 18 million

Capital: Kabul

Area: 652,000 Sq. Km

Religion: Islam (approximately 100%)

Ethnicity: More than 20 ethnic groups, including Pashtun (the majority), Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek

Life expectancy: 45 years

Climate: Desert and semiarid

Afghanistan has no coastline and borders Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan

Visa applications: Required documents include a passport, application form, 2 photographs and a letter of recommendation from an organization such as an NGO with a proven record. Entering Afghanistan for the purpose of tourism is not permitted Applications can only be made on Fridays and Monday mornings and cost ¥3,750 for a stay of less than 154 days.

Transportation: from Japan to Jalalabad:

Tokorozawa - (Express Bus) - Narita Airport - (Pakistan International Airways (PIA)) - Islamabad - (PIA domestic flight) - Peshawar - (taxi) - Pakistan/ Afghan border - (taxi) - Jalalabad. The return journey was the same in reverse.

Time line:

6 March, 5.45am: departure

6:10: Bus to Narita

9:00 Arrive Narita

11:30 The team members had assembled. We received great support from Mr. Sonokawa of the Chiba Triathlon Union and he introduced us to the PIA Tokyo office staff, who facilitated our smooth boarding. The flight was due to depart at 13:55 but was delayed until 15:00. The flight made a brief stop at Beijing to refuel and take meals on board, before arriving on time in Islamabad at 10:00pm.

(Photo: The team assembles at Narita)



The wild cherry tree we brought from Japan was able to enter the country without quarantine or inspection problems. We were met by staff from our hotel and after checking in around 23:30, went straight to sleep.

7 March, 4:30am:We checked out of the hotel and caught a 5:00am bus to the airport for a 6:30 PIA domestic flight. Though domestic flights are often cancelled, our 30-passenger propeller plane departed on time, heading for Peshawar. Flight time was 45 minutes (compared to 3 hours by land). In Peshawar we took a taxi (about PKR100 for a 15 minute ride) to the Greens Hotel, where we ate breakfast and arranged a taxi to the border. The taxis were smaller than normal and we had to hire two in order to squeeze in 5 passengers and our luggage. The ride cost PKR2,500 (about ¥5,000).



The procedure for crossing the border was complicated and we had to travel with police officers through a lawless tribal area before reaching the border at 14:00. The conditions of the roads were better than the last time but we hurried the taxi driver to ensure we arrived while it was still light (his driving was pretty reckless). We traveled through the famous Kyber Pass and arriving at the border went through a rather stressful border-crossing procedure. The taxi wouldn't go right to the border so we had to unload our luggage and paid child baggage handlers to help us carry it to a taxi stand on the Afghan side. They asked for PKR50 but we gave them PKR200.

Many taxi driver are looking for business at the border and we hired 2 taxis at \$20 each. By this time it was 15:00. There were many inspection stops along the way, and although Japanese aide workers would usually have little trouble, we were stopped once for several minutes while our luggage was checked.

We arrived at the Spinghar Hotel at 17:30, where our interpreter Mr. Saidorhack had been waiting for several hours.



A Lucky Break at our Regular Hotel

We stayed at our usual hotel and because there were no electricity blackouts this time, we thought we wouldn't need the candles we had brought as a precaution. Unfortunately however, the light bulb blew out and so we got to use our torches and candles anyway. Forewarned is forearmed!

At least with electricity we thought we'd get hot water, but the water heater was not very efficient and repeatedly turned cold. (I wonder if it always does that?)



The men were assigned to a triple room and a single with one shower and restroom. Mrs. Nishigaki had a slightly larger single room for herself. The cost was thirty dollars a day (forty for Mrs. Nishigaki). We thought that meant for each person, but it turned out to be the cost per room, so we felt lucky! The hotel was under the jurisdiction of the government so we felt safe staying there. There was a 24-hour guard and the fact that unlike last time he didn't carry a gun, made us feel that the situation had become more stable compared to before. Similarly in the town we didn't see people carrying weapons



We also noticed meeting rooms in the hotel where organizations could get together, such as the NGOs that are working to rid the country of the poppy plants used to produce opiates (unofficial figures suggest that Afghanistan is responsible for more than 90% of the world's poppy production).

Rich Afghans with foreign currency are often suspected of being involved in poppy production. Action to destroy the poppies and of course, prevent terrorism, are taking place, as seen in this commemorative sign for a cricket tournament.

There was a meeting of the (International Security Assistance Force) during our stay. I took this photo of member of the Afghan armed forces that had come to the hotel as guards. Their frightening appearance made me quite nervous when I took this photo, but they all had a very easy, straightforward manner.



Planting the Cherry Trees

8 March

One of the objectives of the trip was to plant cherry trees, and we did this first thing, the morning after we arrived. Originally we had wanted to plant them by the football pitch, but fearing that they might be vandalized or stolen, it was thought better to plant the five trees in the courtyard of the university, where an eye could be kept on them.



This photograph is of the Dean of Nangarhar University Department of Education. He joined the university this year and is teaching in the medical department after having spent some time in the United States. He is wearing a suit rather than the traditional costume, and we could also see students wearing shirts and pants. Women, however, wore the traditional “bourkha” when outside.

This is probably the first time a cherry tree has been planted in Afghanistan and if all goes well, it should bloom in a few years. As it is the first time, we cannot tell whether the tree will survive or not, but we wanted to try and chose a relatively sturdy variety of cherry tree.

I bought the trees at “Angyo”, a well-known place in Kawaguchi city, Saitama for ¥1,050 per tree.



All soil had to be removed from the roots in order to get the trees through customs so it was wrapped with humidifying agent and sealed with a special air cap.

If the trees grow, we intend to take more on each trip to the country to plant at the university and would like to have a ‘cherry blossom viewing party (hanami)’ someday (although as alcohol is not allowed, we’ll have to use Pepsi). People at the university seemed delighted with the cherry trees, which are a symbol of Japan. Please bloom safely!

Making a Traditional Afghan Costume.

The best purchase I made during my last visit was a traditional Afghan costume, and so I pressed the men to go with me to the bazaar. First we went to a fabric shop to choose a nice colored fabric that cost PKR320 for 4-meters. Then to a specialist tailor that, after taking some simple measurements, completed the job by the following day for just PKR200. This time I chose a formal costume of pure white. In the photo I’m wearing the costume I has made last time.



Prices in Afghanistan

About ¥500 for a volleyball top and bottom uniform set

About ¥440 for a volleyball

About ¥500 for soccer balls

About ¥300 for a cricket bat

About ¥100 for a cricket ball

About ¥540 for a cricket top and bottom uniform set

About ¥60 for a liter of gasoline

Hotel breakfast about ¥200~300 per person

About ¥20 for a piece of naan bread

Compared with Japan, the quality of sporting goods in Afghanistan is not so good, but there is no other choice. We were surprised at the relatively high price of gasoline. There were a lot more cars than last time, but keeping them on the road must be difficult, although we heard there was no insurance or tax. The cost of breakfast at the hotel and the price of naan in town had doubled since we were last here.

Donating Uniforms Collected in Japan

In Afghanistan they still cannot get hold of many necessities. At the local orphanage, which has almost no income, sporting goods are in very short supply, so we presented them with football uniforms that were collected in Japan. On the trip I had brought a small suitcase, a large travel bag, a rucksack and the 5 cherry tree saplings, of which most of the room was taken up by the uniforms.

Many of the uniforms were collected by NPO Global Sports Alliance (GSA) in response to an appeal through their web site.



The above photograph is a high school student soccer team from the "Al Monbuhali" orphanage of Jalalabad city.



Left is the junior high student team of the school.

In Afghanistan children are admitted to the orphanage if they have no father or no parents at all. Some have no relatives at all. There are about 500 orphans at the school at present, and there are also two orphan homes in the city.

I was quite shocked when one of the orphans asked me, "Do you have your father? Students can speak a little English because they study from Primary school and they used the English they had learned to ask many questions such as my name, my father's name, if I spoke Pashto, am I Japanese or Chinese, my age and so on..."

The question that shocked me was asked by one of the students, and is a question I cannot imagine a Japanese student asking a foreigner. However, after years of domestic fighting, resistance against the Soviet Union and the Taliban era, having a father is something you can't take for granted in Afghanistan

The name of the boy was Alizhan and he is ten years old. He came under the protection of the orphanage about five years ago when he became separated from his family as they fled across the Pakistan border in fear of the Taliban. At first he couldn't enter the orphanage because he couldn't prove he had no father, but thanks to the help of the staff he was finally admitted. When I first met him two years ago his hair was falling out and he had skin conditions from the fear and stress he had suffered, but I was relieved to see he was doing much better. Now he's an energetic boy who helps look after the pre-schoolers in the orphanage. There is still no sign of his family or relatives.



Mr. Hirata from Takarazuka brought uniforms for two teams, donated by the Nissei Chuo Soccer Club. This photo is of the Al Monbuhali orphanage Primary school team.

We also received 30 uniforms from Adidas Japan and those were handed over to a representative of the Olympic Committee for the Province of Nangarhar, who will put them to the most efficient use.

Japan-Afghanistan Friendship Soccer Match (Peace Cup)

10-12 March

Originally we planned to hold two matches on Thursday afternoon (10th) and Friday (11th), but this was changed to three matches from 10-12 March. We planned that the three Japanese footballers were to play on each of the teams but this message hadn't reached the teams, causing some delay.

Day One: 10 March

Nangarhar University Department of Education VS Jalalabad City



Mr. Shimagaki and in the latter half, Mr. Koike) participated in the university team (top left). Mr. Hirata participates in the city team (top right). Day one ended in a 1-1 draw.

Day Two: 11 March

Nangarhar University Headquarters team VS Jalalabad City

Day two also ended in a 1-1 draw with all three Japanese players taking part. Mr. Hirata made history for becoming the first Japanese player to score a goal in Afghanistan.



Day Three: 12 March

Al Monbuhali Orphanage High School VS Spinnerghal Senior High School (Jalalabad City)

The Al Monbuhali team won 3-1, with Mr. Shimagaki scoring a goal.



The left photograph is the manager of the Al Monbuhali team (a former sports shop owner).

He was pleased to receive a crystal glass shield brought from Japan to give to the winning team.

Despite extensive preparations going back more than a year, the arrangements over times and teams we still undecided, which caused some concern. This is perhaps a national characteristic and having visited the country three times I didn't get stressed out to just let things take their natural course. As they say in Islam, "Inshala" meaning "Allah's will be done". It is a convenient expression and was very useful during the trip.

A Support Center for Working Woman Became a Target for Radicals.

A support center for working women became a target for radicals and a sewing machine and iron that I donated when we visited in 2004 were destroyed.

It became a target because it was connected with the government and had American support. Opposition has increased with incidents such as the Islamic satirical cartoons published in Europe. To replace the sewing machine, Mrs. Nishigaki donated a new one.



US Army Helicopters

No one shows any surprise at a US Army helicopter flying at low-altitude in the sky above the university at noon on a weekday. Such an event is a daily occurrence.

A School Satchel from Japan

We bumped into this boy carrying a relatively new school satchel sent by a Japanese NGO on his back as he made his way to school. A student's name, class and school name were written on the bag in Japanese.



Teach us Japanese!

While Mr. Koike took a rest during a match interval, many children approached saying, "please teach us Japanese" and asking us to repeated some Islamic phrases.

Mrs. Nishigaki donated sports equipment to the orphanage volleyball team (below right) and a cricket team (below left).



Building construction can be seen going on in Jalalabad, but unfortunately environmental pollution from clouds of dust and emissions from traffic jams are also on the rise, with no evidence of environmental considerations being taken. On the right of the photo you can see an auto rickshaws, which is a common form of transport for many. They are loud, slow and produce high levels of emissions.



Education for girls, which was prohibited during the Taliban era, is now taking place. There are so many students that there isn't enough room in the schoolhouse, so classes take place outside. Boys and girls, even in Primary school, are in separate classes, the boys attending class in the morning and the girls in the afternoon.

The photo on the right shows Mr. Shimagaki and Mr. Hirata joining a class.



These children live in the house next to the hotel.



When I took a morning stroll, I came across these children collecting dead leaves, which they use for kindling when cooking. They stopped to take this photo. One of the children had no shoes on his feet, but I noticed that they all had such clear, beautiful eyes.

Summary

This report, albeit a rough account, is an attempt to share the feelings I experienced and to give some insight into the current situation in Afghanistan. From years of war, the children of Afghanistan have lost everything, and yet they are the most sweet and amiable children imaginable. I wish that the Japanese media would show this face of Afghanistan, and in addition to sending aide, help these children so that by the time they become independent adults, Afghanistan will have become a physically and spiritually prosperous country.

For myself, I'll continue to contribute in a spirit of "social contribution through sport", working patiently and persistently, and I look forward to meeting up with the children in Afghanistan again next year!

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