When you write about somewhere like Kabul, which is as different from Oakham as the moon is from Mars its hard to know where to start. There are so many negative images about Afghanistan in Britain: crazy Islamic terrorists; Osama Bin Laden; women with no freedom; poverty; war. Of course many of these images have a basis in truth: but there is another side. Afghanistan has been to hell but is desperate to get a taste of heaven. It is a land which has been at war for so long it has forgotten what peace means. Foreigners and Afghans alike have been fighting since 1979. First the Soviets, then the Warlords (Mujahideen) followed by the infamous Taliban and now the Americans. The statistics make you weep: 1.5 million dead; many millions injured perhaps without limbs; 5 million refugees in Pakistan and Iran alone; trauma resulting from war, atrocities, abuse; at least 60% of the population earn less than 65p a day and go hungry most of the time. Quality shelter is at a premium.

So it may be a surprise to hear that (so far) every time I visit this place I leave uplifted. How is this possible? It’s the people, their energy and optimism. People are so welcoming. They love foreigners who come in peace, especially those who come to help. People have time for you. There are so many faces-I have never been to a place with so much facial character. Pashtoons, the great warriors, the ones who beat the British, with Indian-Pakistani features, wearing pyjama-like shalwar kamiz outfits, some bearing tunics and impressive beards, kalashnikovs, gunbelts and expressions you could never copy. Tajiks are the next most numerous group grading in appearance between Pashtoons and Central Asians. These are Dari speaking people (a Persian language which is the main Afghan language). The Uzbeks, Turkmenis and Khirgistanis are real Central Asian peoples: narrow eyes and paler skins resembling part Tibetan, Mongolian and Chinese. Deeply weathered faces and beaming smiles, especially when they are looking for business! Finally the European types - white skins and piercing blue and green eyes- people who would not be amiss in Oakham. So many faces from so many places with expressions which burn into your mind. Afghanistan has been a meeting of east and west and middle for thousands of years.

Like spring coming after a long frozen winter there are signs of hope, of optimism, of a better world. War weary people desperately hoping for peace to last long enough to make a difference. Kabul is busy rebuilding its war-torn shell. Creating new amidst the desolate war damaged buildings, like shoots after a forest fire. A new land arising. Entrepreneurial business people and traders swarm like intent bees making money in bazaars and markets swollen with the fruits of the Orient: gemstones; lapis lazuli; jewellery; handicrafts; clothes; hardware; computers; mouth watering fruits; dead animals strung up on bazaar beams; books; DVD's...most of everything...if you have the cash. Kabul was a trading city when Rutlanders hunted animals dressed in deerskins. New banks have appeared - the first for 30 years. Everything is bought and sold in cash. The affluent buy their big houses with wheelbarrows of cash - millions of Afghani notes or thousands of dollars sometimes in wheelbarrows.
Women still wear blue burqas. Traditional Afghan culture encourages girls over the age of 13 to reveal only their hands and feet in public. Only their families can see their faces. The Taliban enforced this role strictly but burqas have been part of Afghani life for a long time. You sometimes see polished fingernails, smart and glittering high heeled shoes: glimpses of wealth and individuality beneath the all-covering shroud. Educated and richer Afghani, mainly Kabuli ladies do not wear burqa and work in open society. They are dressed in sometimes expensive trousers and tops, adorned with jewellery and make up, heads covered by fashionable scarves. Western minds look on uncomprehendingly at burqa-clad women: but who are we to judge?

Children are everywhere. Most families have 4-10 children. Some men have up to 4 wives. Many children die young, usually of hunger or dirty water. The day I landed my friend who met me at the airport lost a daughter aged 7 of a 'bad stomach' probably caused by unhygienic water. Medical facilities are poor. Most families have lost children here through war or poverty or both. And yet they smile and get on with life - what else can they do? They are just grateful that another day has come. Many children have to work - not for pocket money but to help out their money-starved parents. They sell books, magazines, drinks, chewing gum, or just beg. They do this after their 3 hours of school a day. There are no playstations or TV or even electricity for most. They are thankful to read and write. Kids play on busy streets - cricket with a makeshift bat made of discarded wood and a ragged old ball. There are smiles, there is camaraderie, there is friendship and welcome in their faces: they do their best to love life in spite of their poverty. One kid showed me a glow in dark pen he was so proud of - he lit up a dark area and laughed. A gem to treasure and show off to friends.

So Afghanistan is full of hope. Afghani people are hard working, resourceful and intelligent. There’s an energy and a determination to make life better for all. Let’s hope time is kind for once.
Kabul Diary (by Mike Petterson)

19 May 2010

It has been a fascinating experience returning to Afghanistan after a gap of 3 years. Between 2003 and 2007 I visited Afghanistan some 8 or 9 times as Director of a major institutional strengthening programme for the Ministry of Mines and Industry. I now return to begin a new modest project working with the Geoscience Faculty of the University of Kabul, which will ‘twin’ the University of Leicester with its Kabul sister for some 3 years.

Afghanistan is a place where superlatives and ‘extreme adjectives’ abound. It is a land of great suffering with continuous warfare being experienced in some form since 1979. It is a country of clear skies, high mountains, deserts and lush fertile valleys. Afghanistan defines ‘contrast’ better than any dictionary. On the one hand the people are warriors who have defeated the world’s greatest empires’, on the other hand the same people display a level of genuine hospitality difficult to find in an ever more corporatized-globe. They are the 4th poorest country in the world but they will share what they have without a blink of the eye. Tribal affinity and family ties are some of the strongest that exist and yet there is still time to help the stranger and be generous with time. I’d like to spend a few moments dwelling on one of these ‘contrasts’ that makes Afghanistan a difficult country for Westerners to understand: ‘good news’ stories from a place that only seems to produce bad news-stories in Western media outlets.

We often associate Afghanistan with body bags, lost limbs, brave young soldiers, intolerant religious-political philosophies, and lack of opportunities for women. Each of these ‘associations’ is founded in some ‘truth’ but then ‘truth’ can depend on cultural perspectives that can give widely divergent judgements...

The biggest good-news story is the survival of the people through decades of adversity – their sheer determination to make it through the day. This is visible on a series of levels. Kabul in 2003 resembled Berlin in 1945 – a war-devastated city of ruins. Today the city reverberates to the sound of construction with plush 5 star hotels, refurbished Ministry buildings, supermarkets, business centres, telecommunication towers etc all springing up like new growth in a fire-scorched forest. The quiet streets of 2003 are replaced by traffic jams, cars of all shapes and sizes and even traffic lights (when the power is on). There is cuisine of every kind – Kabul Kebabs, to Herati and Iranian lamb skewers, bistros, coffee bars and pizza joints. Whole streets sell wedding gowns, flowers for weddings and funerals, and Afghan handicrafts (carpets, lapis lazuli jewellery, shisha pipes, Lee Enfield rifles and Turkmeni scimitar swords). Women work in Ministries, airlines, universities and colleges, laboratories, hospitals and schools. Only last night at 10pm we saw a group of women winding their way home after a night out – something unimaginable a few years ago. And, as someone forcefully said to me, saying he didn’t understand why the West were obsessed with President Karzai’s ‘corruption issue’, perhaps the greatest success has been the Afghan government getting 34 individual provincial rulers, many mutual hated enemies, around one seat of government.
Yes, undoubtedly there is corruption, but considering the fragility and immaturity of systems of governance it is amazing that this one still stands, albeit with the help of the International community.

Heroism and bravery exist on so many levels within so many people. One person I am working with who showed me his ‘Taliban picture’ (all men had to wear turbans and grow a beard at least as long as their fist in Taliban times) told me about how they have existed within the university throughout Soviet, Mujahideen and Taliban days. In Russian days academics were pressurised to ‘preach the faith of Marxist materialism or become an enemy of the people’. In Mujahideen times the intra-factional warfare was vicious in Kabul, leading to law and order breakdown and anarchy (hence the initial welcome of Taliban). During the Taliban period there was no respect for books, or learning, or science or education, except the strict and prescriptive religious teachings of the day. Now, my friend says, there is optimism. Students are returning, female student numbers are rapidly growing, a new generation of academics have arrived desperately needing training, access to international knowledge, and equipment (in some places there is one desktop computer to 11 members of staff). Challenges are at every corner but hope is present where none existed before.

Of course the future remains uncertain. Kabul streets still ring to the sound of ISAF armoured vehicles with antennae that block out all mobile communications for 1km radius around them. Checkpoints, road blocks, embassies surrounded by bomb-proof cement prisms and sand bags, and the ever-present threat of a suicide bomb are brutal reminders of the darker realities. And yet...if the international community can stay around long enough to provide security and help Afghans rebuild their systems and institutions, helping them to help themselves there just might, might be a chance. As one old Afghan friend said to me ‘remember we are not starting from ground zero but ground zero and below. Ground zero is where you build a house on a field that had nothing in it, in Afghanistan you have to fill the bomb craters, remove all the land mines, decontaminate the site, redevelop building skills and then you just might be able to build your house’. A sobering metaphor I thought.
20 May Kabul Diary

Mike Petterson

‘The Future is Before My Eyes’

Today I had the privilege of speaking to 55 18-20 year old students at the University of Kabul. I was there together with fellow Kabul University teachers and officers from the British Council. One British Council Afghan lady (called Gulghutai – or ‘flower of the tree’) did a wonderful translation job as I waxed and waned about our new project and aspects of environmental science (their chosen subject). I was struck by the possibility that the future of Afghanistan lay before me embodied within a group of young people, relatively untainted and un-baggaged. ready to take upon themselves the challenges of building a new world. We discussed ideas such as ‘you are not here just to get a degree but to empower yourselves to give Afghanistan hope’; ‘you know many of your peers did not have your opportunities of education at school and university, so let’s squeeze every last drop of juice from the educational bottle’; and ‘enlightened minds are much more powerful than nuclear bombs’. The latter in particular, though perhaps a bit cheesey, is pertinent with respect to the Taliban, who fear education more than armies, and know in their hearts that their narrow Wahabi-interpretation of Islam collapses like a pack of cards under wise scrutiny. So the future engineers, scientists, policy makers and decision takers listened attentively, were beautifully patient and courteous and hopefully left the room at least thinking ‘I don’t have to listen to that crazy Englishman anymore’. We noted only five of the fifty five were girls but commented this was five more than would have been possible a few years ago.

Then I listen to an Afghan ‘old hand’ who knows Afghanistan better than his own country. He discusses corruption, present at all levels. Even teachers and police need bribes to keep going (but who wouldn’t on $40 a month and many mouths to feed?). At the higher end of the food chain rich and powerful people are connected directly to money-making ventures that need war to sustain them such as gun-running and drug trafficking. The old ruling elite are present in droves within government and industry with little real connection or affinity with the jobless masses. Then again we mused, is this so different to Britain that has just returned a government full of white upper and middle class men who graduated from the best private schools and Oxbridge (and sell this as ‘change’) or the USA where corporate America holds the real power seducing the masses with the ‘American Dream’. Yes, you meet all types in Afghanistan – it’s full of foreign dreamers, radicals, cynics and naive-hopers all rolled into one. I read an article here in a magazine called ‘Afghan Scene’ by a writer who had traded goods from 1960s and 70s ‘Hippie’ Kabul spending 3 months every year in a town that was heady with wacky herbal smokes, Afghan jackets and coffee bars all soaked within an atmosphere of tolerance, fun and hospitality. This same guy went on to help invent MTV and has recently returned broken-hearted to a broken city commenting ‘in my day three philosophical groups were fighting it out (rhetorically): the Communists, the Islamists, and the New Age Liberals. Perhaps today a similar philosophical fight is going on, albeit in an extreme warrior fashion – let’s hope the extreme Islamist side doesn’t win out as this holds little hope for anyone and Afghans deserve much more than this’
My day ends with an article in the *Afghanistan Times* that focuses on perhaps the biggest issue here: lack of opportunities for people to make a living. Kabul has 35% unemployment (estimated) and this is growing fast as people drift to the city from the Provinces. One malicious symptom of this is people trafficking. Desperate people pay unscrupulous dealers their life savings to get them abroad to a ‘better life’. One victim described how he jumped from a ship with a capacity of 20 people, crammed with over 40 people, before it sank, to arrive exhausted on some unknown foreign beach. He passed ‘piles of human bones’ that recorded the journeys of previous emigrants and after killing a sheep to keep himself alive ended up in police custody and back in Afghanistan. Today, in Herat on the Iranian border many people took to the streets protesting at the harsh treatment of the Iranians in returning bruised and battered Afghan refugees back to Afghanistan.

So I reflected on the optimistic discussions with the young students. It’s true – they are the future: they manifest hope in their smiles. But what a responsibility on their young shoulders to improve all of this!
Diary for Friday May 21st, Kabul

Mike Petterson

Kites, Cricket, Traffic and Zips

Friday is holiday time for Kabulis. It’s a time for the mosque, meditation and prayer and/or family, friends and relaxation. The mullahs cry out from the many mosque-speakers around the town sermonising all who will listen. People mull around the many bustling markets shopping for life’s essentials or luxuries as budgets allow. I passed a meat market where 7 cow’s heads were sitting in a detached manner on one stall, hosting flies like a Damien Hurst creation, whilst next door’s stall, seemingly- appropriately hosted a dozen pairs of cow’s hooves.

We drove to a hill overlooking the town. Kabul contains many hills and rocky outcrops – like a dozen of Edinburgh’s Arthurs Seat with the distant 7000m Hindu Kush and the city sprawled out on the mountain plain, spilling upwards onto a number of peaks. The hill I was on (Muslim Hill) has a flat table-top mount with a marbled Kings palace. The second I left the car I was surrounded by youngsters shouting ‘one dollar’, ‘seven dollars’ ‘fifty Afghans’ (local currency) and smiles from ear to ear. One young girl, aged 7, was named ‘Parwani’ or butterfly which seemed appropriate on a hill full of kite flyers. As many will now know, after the famous book and movie, Kabul is famous for kite flying and Friday is kite day. I was too early to see the competitive kite flyers who glue glass to the string of their kites and attempt to cut competitors’ strings: the winner holds the last flying kite. The kites are well designed and fly incredibly high on even a slight breeze. Some horsemen from Herat were riding around training for bukhazi – a polo game that uses the corpse of a goat or cow instead of a polo ball and is quite wild and macho. A cricket game was in full swing with what looked like sledges for wickets, a beaten up out-of-shape soft ball and an improvised piece of wood for a bat. Nevertheless there was no doubting the enthusiasm of the many players under the beating midday sun – no tea breaks and soft cold drinks for these guys. Afghanistan now play cricket at the highest levels and are hoping to become a Test playing team – and good for them!

What is striking about Friday’s is the lack of traffic. Other days take 30 minutes to travel a couple of kilometres but on Fridays the road is yours. Non-Friday days consist of bumper to bumper traffic travelling at snails’ pace with saloon cars, pick-ups, 4x4’s, military vehicles, lorries, and horse-drawn traffic all competing for space and movement. But on Friday’s there is time to travel.

We headed to the tailors bazaar. This comprises a number of stalls or people crouching on the ground occupying whatever space they are allowed, offering a complete range of services relating to tailoring, shoe repairs, leather work and the like. Unlike the modern West there remains a vibrant market for repairing things – no throw-away and buy the next model society here. People will have so many patches on shoes it can be hard to see the original shoe-style. Remarkably the skills exist in the people for repairs in a way they have all but died out in much of Europe. One of my travel bags was developing an irritating habit of zip malfunctioning rendering the item pretty useless. In the UK I would have resigned myself to losing the bag knowing that it was probably cheaper to buy a new one than get the item fixed, even if I could find someone prepared to do the job. Not so here. A few
words with the helpful elder tailor in the bazaar and I was directed to a 17 year old boy (or young man) from Panjshir who was haunched in the shade, armed with an impressive mechanical Chinese-made mechanical sewing machine, tailors scissors, a range of zips and zippers, thick, nail-like darning needles and an array of other items. More importantly perhaps he possessed the knowledge and needed the business. I bought a fruit juice from his 13 year old brother who was selling soft drinks next to his elder sibling. The young tailor looked at the job, decided I needed a new zip, told me it would cost $4 and set to work. I was transfixed, fascinated for about an hour, watching this young man at work. He skilfully remove the zip from my laptop rucksack-style bag (and what an awkward shaped bag for the zip-wizard!), searched carefully for an appropriate quality new zip and pair of zippers, then proceed to carefully install these within my bag, first by hand, and then with his mechanically-powered (via muscle turning a wheel) sewing machine. It was a marvel to behold! The two boys went to school (they said) for up to 5 hours a day, but I wondered how many days this actually occurred and how much of their schooling was interrupted by the necessity of these kids to help the family make ends meet. The level of skill and street-wise-ness the brothers displayed suggested to me they would spend more time in the bazaar than studying. Above them was a building that had been gutted by a Taliban bomb 5 months previously – luckily only one person died (it could have been a score or more). The juxtaposition of street kids having to make a living and terrorists indiscriminately killing without a conscience sent a tingle of chilling reality down my spine.
Kabul Diary (Mike Petterson)
Saturday 22 May
The Aid Circus

Kabul abounds with aid people. It is a truly international community. Europeans, North and South Americans, Turks, Iranians, Bangladeshis, Indians, Chinese, Pakistanis – even Africans from very poor countries themselves. So many people, so many skills, so much experience. Most of them have good hearts and motivation. Some of course have other, less noble, intentions. Such is human nature.

The aid is badged in many different forms – USAID, AUSAID, EUAID, thousands of NGO (non-government organisation) organisations, Islamic aid, Christian Aid, Ismaili Aid, the many-headed labyrinthine United Nations aid and so forth. A plethora of institutions building roads, hospitals, bridges, schools, government buildings; strengthening governance and government, stimulating the private sector...the whole landscape is highly complex and baffling.

So, with all this international interest and effort and trillions of dollars of investment you would think that Afghanistan should be rebuilding itself at a rate of knots. The Western media often portrays the ‘helping hand of the West’ as a one-way street form of altruism and reflects in bewilderment ‘why is progress so slow?’ Impatience sweats through every pore ‘how long, how long does it take?’; ‘how many of our young men have to die?’; ‘Afghanistan is a crazy place anyway and nothing to do with us – let’s pull out now – they have had their chance’.

Every life lost is tragic. Every limb that is blown away or mind that is warped beyond repair is a human disaster. Is it all worth it? Is Afghanistan an ungrateful lost cause?

I am biased, probably because I have spent a little time here and made a few real connections with real people. My view is that nation building takes decades, generations. Just look even in Europe at the length of time it has taken countries to become half-decent places for most of society. At the height of the British Empire most Britons lived in abject Dickensian squalor and even now 10% of UK citizens own 90% of the wealth. Civilisation within European nations is skin deep and can be lost within a decade when the going gets really tough and human beings become competitive animals. The aid machine in Afghanistan does an awful lot of good – let’s not forget that but it also leaves a lot to be desired. None of the aid comes without strings, agendas and influence. There is little joined-up thinking. Too many aid related experts are on a personal gravy train. Too many countries spend too high a proportion of their aid budgets on themselves, their own interests and their own citizens. Ordinary Afghans can be left out of the whole circus, receiving only breadcrumbs from the rich nations table. Many aid projects that could populate their whole workforce with Afghans choose instead to import their own nationals. Schools are built without trained Afghan teachers and
hospitals built without trained Afghan doctors: every building bearing a plaque: ‘built for the benefit of the Afghan people by _insert the name of some foreign country here_’.

Is this too cynical? Too dark? Too negative? I sincerely hope so because if the perceptions are half-right it’s just too depressing to contemplate. It’s far better people have a go for all the weaknesses, frailties, cul-de-sacs and dead ends that can occur – ‘stuff happens’ as Americans say. I suppose ‘ideal aid’ is something that has been strategically thought out, is fully joined-up, is properly costed and executed in a timely manner, serves priority needs, employs as many Afghans and as few foreigners as possible, focuses on up-skilling and up-training people as much as building objects, and does not lead to over-dependence but instead gives way, in time to a healthy economy (whatever that looks like). Is this too aspirational? Too unobtainable? Too naive?

So what I needed was a reality check and boy did I get one. For over 30 minutes a bunch of Afghans berated the government in front of my ears. ‘A bunch of crooks’ said one, ‘corrupt as they come’ said another, ‘war criminals with blood and war crimes on their hands’ said another, ‘one guy has made his brother a double billionaire in five years’ a friend shouted, ‘three years ago one (VIP in power) man kidnapped a family and raped one and all for a week with no retribution’ an acquaintance alleged in an increasingly animated manner. Whatever the truth in this world of claim and counter claim one thing is apparent: the government are disconnected from many of the people and are not trusted. So I asked ‘what is the way forward? Who will you trust? Where should the international community focus assistance? What sort of Government should be encouraged? I was met by a confused silence, the product of 30 years of fighting, ethnic hatred, dreadful acts of cruelty, broken promises, blood feuds, and so much more. Nation building does indeed take a long time, especially when you start at a bruised, battered, broken and cheated beginning. Let’s hope the world understands this _realpolitik_ and hangs around long enough to see the rebirth of a truly strong nation.
Land-locked countries in the middle of continents have to contend with (as a fact of life) many neighbours. Just take a look at a map of Afghanistan surrounded by Pakistan, Iran, China, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan – a glorious pantheon of ‘stans’. Isn’t it so lucky to have so many friends nearby I hear you say? Well maybe, but possibly not also. Afghanistan’s rich history has benefited from the coalescence of people from Central Asia, Europe, south Asia and China. But it’s very strategic position has made it the subject of Empire competition – as for example the ‘Great Game’ of the 18th century, where the great Russian and British Empires vied for influence over the ‘buffer state’ of Afghanistan. And history repeats itself today, caught between Iran and Pakistan with the emerging super-powers of China and India a stone’s throw away, Russia and its former ‘Soviet Stans’ to the north and the wider international community, all acting a play around and within the country. Not a simple situation by any means – and certainly not an island within an ocean of splendid isolation.

The same position has given Afghanistan stunning scenery. The very western edge of the great tectonic plate of India shoots through Afghanistan and is but one of a whole host of continental collisions throughout geological time that have created a land of high mountains, glaciers, inter-montane plains, deep gorges, baking deserts and even a volcano. Today I travelled to the edge of Kabul and was able to touch the surrounding high-Hindu Kush and look back upon the city of Kabul growing like a crop of flowers between, within and upon a complex network of hills, mountains and valleys. We looked upon the very fault system that marks the edge of India and saw how it creates new topography in real-time. Truly and marvel of nature.

We parked the car and started walking through irrigated green fields of wheat, beans, orchards and vineyards. Men ‘salaamed’, women shyly hid their faces or looked away (the younger ones peeking when they thought you weren’t looking), all smiling and wishing us well. We came upon a beehive in the middle of a field. Pashtoon honey cultivators move with the seasons and their colonies of bees between Kabul and Jalalabad (how do they not get stung I wondered!). The honey was too much for some of the party to resist and they bought some very liquid, fresh, runny-honey at $10 a kilogram. We were offered a meal of curried beans but unfortunately had to decline. Further on we met the ‘Kuchis’, also Pashtoons: nomadic livestock herders who live in tents and move from pasture to pasture with the passing of summer into winter. Then an obstacle: a Tajik man who liked the sound of his own voice (very much). The man had fought with several armies but was retired without money a few years ago. He was poor and bored and a little angry. He was not so happy that some ‘ghuris’ or ‘white people’ were walking on his land. Furthermore the ‘ghuris’ were not ‘mussel-men’ ‘muslims’ – they were ‘kafirs’ who ate unclean food and lived an un-Islamic life – for their own good they should convert to the one true faith, and he wasn’t sure if we should go onwards through his
land. The speech was met with a mixture of piety and seriousness, but mostly diplomatic laughter and a feeling of ‘we are very sorry, this guy is a bit crazy, you are most welcome here the way you are, don’t worry’. So onwards we went undertaking our work with the sound of roaring thunder in the distance as the sky met the mountains of the beautiful Hindu Kush peaks. Afghanistan – the land of eternal surprise – you will never be bored here!
Kuchi nomad camp in Hindu Kush
Kabul Diary (Mike Petterson)

Tuesday 25 May

Farewell Kabul: British Council, Peshawar and University Twinning

My time in Kabul ended with flight PK 250 from Kabul to Peshawar, Pakistan. The mainly empty propeller plane took its handful of passengers eastwards across the Khyber. We headed over the Kabul Plain and the sharp, ice-covered Hindu Kush mountains, beyond the greener Jalalabad Valley, over the Khyber and downwards to Peshawar.

Before I left Kabul I had a meeting with officers serving at the British Council, including the Director, Tony Jones and colleagues Julia Cave Smith and Gulghutai. The mission of the British Council is badly needed in Afghanistan as there is a high demand for the English language and educational connections with the UK. Like many expatriates working with the various arms of international government in Afghanistan, British Council staff are highly dedicated with a strong sense of public service. As Kabul is not a family-friendly posting (for obvious reasons) most people work in Afghanistan separated from spouses, partners, children, friends and loved ones. Lifestyles are necessarily constrained by the security realities and the strong sense of care of duty governments have for their staff in difficult postings such as Kabul. I am personally indebted to the British Council as they are funding my work in Kabul. The objective of the project is to form links between the University of Leicester and Kabul. I am seeking additional funding to also bring in to play the University of Peshawar and other UK universities. The purpose of the project is to strengthen university departments, develop teaching materials, offer staff development and research opportunities to staff, and improve the teaching experience of students. Staff at Kabul University are dedicated and work extremely hard in difficult circumstances. Teaching materials are limited, research laboratory equipment is sparse, internet connections are slow and unreliable, and computers are a premium. Typical of countries that have suffered protracted war, is the phenomenon of the ‘missing generation’ with the age profile of staff reflecting this: older highly experienced staff and newly-qualified staff looking for guidance, additional qualifications and access to international standard teaching materials and research work together, missing the experience link across the generations. We hope that our project will help a little in strengthening skills and materials. Demand is essentially infinite and resources are limited. The future security of this region depends heavily on education and employment opportunities – without these, long term, sustainable peace is unlikely. If anyone can help at all or has ideas about attracting resources to provide more Afghans with greater access to educational resources and grants for Masters and PhD level qualifications please contact me (mp329@le.ac.uk). It would be tremendous to think that in 5 or 10 years time we had helped to build a strong university: a beacon of peace in a land of uncertainty.

Another strand of the process is to bring in Peshawar University as a project partner. Peshawar is a wonderful gateway city to the Khyber – it was the very NW frontier edge to the British Raj. Peshawaris have much in common with Kabulis including language, Pashtoon-dominated tribal roots
and a partly-common history. The two cities have at times been part of the same country and at others separated – today by the Durand Line separating Afghanistan from Pakistan. Peshawar is a bustling city with a history extending back to Gandharan Buddhism and beyond. It has played host (and continues to play host) to millions of Afghan refugees who have fled their homeland over the Khyber in search of peace and a new life, as countless predecessors have done throughout history. I have been lucky enough to have been associated with Peshawar University for almost 30 years and in that time have seen its fortunes ebb and flow. Presently there is good news with new equipment and a forward-looking Higher Education Commission who have strategically funded hundreds if not thousands of Pakistanis to obtain PhD level qualifications all over the world in an attempt to strengthen the Higher Education sector within Pakistan. The University of Leicester has been the recipient of this scheme, as have many other universities. What is now required is a period of consolidation once the newly-qualified academic staff return to their universities in the Orient. So tying in Peshawar with Kabul would be a great bonus to the project – an inspiration to Kabul University to see fellow-Pashtoons prospering and exploring new approaches to education and research for the needs of the NW frontier and nation.

Maybe, in the long run, new countries are built, bridges constructed, networks created and alliances cemented at the direct interpersonal level. Every human connection, every hand across the dividing wall, every joint meal, shared smile and partnered work project is a step on the real road to peace. Peace comes with winning hearts and minds, breaking down barriers and providing opportunities for education and employment. Through this real, tangible hope begins and a future fit for the wonderful people of Afghanistan can begin to emerge.

Thanks for staying with me through the trip.

Signing out for now.

Mike Petterson (mp329@le.ac.uk)