



Naik Mohammad Hakimi

## FREEDOM FIGHTER'S TOUGHEST BATTLE

Freedom fighter Naik Mohammad Hakimi spent years in prison during the Russian occupation of Afghanistan. He has experienced the darkest side of humanity and yet today, he is a man at peace with himself. By HELEN BASILI.

Naik Mohammad Hakimi remembers a time when his homeland of Afghanistan was both beautiful and peaceful. It was a time when the mountainous landscape had not yet been scarred from bombs and landmines and ancient elaborate mosques stood untarnished. But Hakimi's memories of life after the Russian invasion of 1979 are of a starkly different nature.

Hakimi was married, with four children, and working as a pharmacist in southern Afghanistan when he was first imprisoned in 1979. A devout Sunni Muslim, he was outraged that the invading Russians had banned religious worship and refused to cease practicing Islam. As a result he was taken to the local military headquarters and kept under surveillance for three months. He was interrogated regularly and accused of being a member of the *Mujahideen* (freedom fighters).

Upon his release, Hakimi resumed his religious worship and pharmacy work as usual. It was a short-lived period of stability. Several

weeks later, Hakimi's house was stormed by 40 *Khad* (secret police). They pushed around his wife and children, hurled insults at them and accused Hakimi of using his pharmacist's supply of medicine to assist the struggle against the Communist regime. This time he was taken to the infamous Pauli Karchi prison in Kabul, the Afghan capital.

"They tortured me severely but the period of imprisonment was short," says Hakimi, speaking through an interpreter. In less than a month, Hakimi's captors subjected him to a variety of tortures. He was starved and kept for days in a cell without any light. They bashed him with electrical cables and, at one stage, electrocuted him 25 times in one day.

"When I was released [the Russian soldiers] started humiliating us and chasing us up so I joined the [*Mujahideen*] resistance group at that time and started struggling against them," says Hakimi. By day, Hakimi worked as a pharmacist at the children's hospital in Kabul and by

night he worked for the *Mujahideen*. "What I was doing was mainly helping the wounded and injured victims of war in their treatment and rehabilitation. I wasn't taking any guns to participate in the battlefield but indirectly I was supporting them through [the provision of] medical assistance. I was working in those areas that because of continuous war, rocket attacks and bombardment, a lot of people were injured, particularly women and children."

It wasn't long before Hakimi was again imprisoned and tortured by the Russians. He was taken back to Pauli Karchi prison, but this time it would take another four years to win his freedom. "It is the worst situation that I could describe. Even when I talk about it now I feel my hair standing on end," says Hakimi.

"As soon as they put us in prison they took everything from us. [The prison] had huge surrounding walls that not even a tank could get through. There were eight huge buildings. At each entrance there were

soldiers with guns and tanks and they had bright lights so they could chase people trying to enter the prison or get out. In one room in there were approximately 250, even up to 400 people in that one room. It was surrounded by metal bars like a cage so it was really very hard."

For the first six months of his imprisonment, Hakimi's family had no idea of his whereabouts and feared him dead. When they finally learnt that he was in Pauli Karchi prison, it was still another year before they were allowed to visit him. At this stage he had four children, aged 10, eight, six and four.

Meanwhile Hakimi was enduring the most horrific living conditions. The prison cells he was confined in were overcrowded, cold, damp and infested with lice and cockroaches. The food was prepared in unsanitary conditions and, as a consequence, the prisoners experienced frequent bouts of diarrhoea. There were few toilets in the prison and the queues outside were always long, for those who could make it.

These conditions were traumatic enough in themselves, but Hakimi was also continuously tortured for the first 20 months of his imprisonment. "They pulled out my nails from my fingers and feet. They were heating a sort of stove thing and putting our feet on top of it to burn us.

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Now my feet are numb because of that. It wasn't just me - there were 60,000 prisoners and they were doing it to everybody. They bashed me all over my face and my face went like a watermelon," says Hakimi.

His torturers were innovative with their cruelty. They tied him in a metal cage, doused him with water and administered electric shocks. On another occasion Hakimi was locked in a dark, wet tunnel for 36 days. For three months he was placed in a small room of one by two metres with 15 other prisoners. There was not enough room for everybody to lie down at night and they had to take turns sleeping in shifts. Hakimi estimates that he slept no more than one hour a night for the entire three month period.

In 1984, Hakimi was released from Pauli Karchi prison, after an international campaign by Amnesty International to have him freed. Days after his release he received death threats and fled on foot to neighbouring Pakistan. The journey was perilous and involved climbing over steep mountain passes riddled with gangs of armed outlaws. It took Hakimi 18 days to reach Pakistan. His wife and children joined him, travelling by the same route, several months later.

Hakimi and his family lived in a refugee camp in Pakistan for the next nine years. His wife gave birth to

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another two boys during this time, and Hakimi continued to provide support to the Mujahideen. In 1993, the Australian government accepted the family's claim for refugee status and in August of that year, they arrived in Sydney.

Hakimi was no longer in survival mode. Afghanistan was half a world away; he was no longer in danger and the opportunity to have a normal life lay ahead of him. It was at this point that he could no longer

contain the immense psychological turmoil that raged inside him. "What happened when I came to Australia was that every two or three months I was having a sort of [panic] attack. My heart was pumping and I couldn't control myself. I was hitting my children and hitting my head against the wall so I was really feeling bad and all the time I was being taken to the hospital," Hakimi says.

During one of these hospital visits, Hakimi was referred to the Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS). Hakimi was in a desperate state when he began counselling sessions at STARTTS in late 1995. He felt unable to even venture out of his house alone and was

always accompanied by relatives to his appointments at STARTTS. He was experiencing insomnia and nightmares, concentration and memory problems, intrusive thoughts, angry outbursts, panic attacks and flashbacks to past traumatic incidents. He was virtually unable to watch television as any news of Afghanistan or war footage would exacerbate his symptoms.

Hakimi attended regular counselling sessions at STARTTS for five years and completed his therapy late last year. He still comes to STARTTS for physiotherapy treatment

as the physical sequelae of his torture are long-standing.

"Now I'm a completely different person and I feel that I am a complete person now," says Hakimi. "I haven't had any [panic] attacks for a long time. The last one was two years ago. I've got everything in terms of my memory again...I never used to be able to sleep for more than one hour. Now I can sleep even for five hours a night. I can control my anger and frustration...I am very patient and listening to [my children] and responding very well."

Hakimi says that the most important factor in his recovery was the opportunity to talk about his experiences in a private, confidential and supportive environment: "If I hadn't had that opportunity I would have [my past experiences] in my mind all the time so I would probably be living with that memory for the rest of my life."

Hakimi now has seven children and lives with his wife and children in the western Sydney suburb of Quakers Hill. He places his hopes in his children's future and looks forward to their educational and career accomplishments. He is still effected by the turbulence that currently besieges Afghanistan but prefers to concentrate on the small contribution he can make rather than the overwhelming problems: "If I can send \$100 from my social security to my family in Afghanistan and Pakistan then that is probably all I can do." ○