



Living in LIMBO

Detainees in the Woomera Detention Centre,
South Australia

HELEN BASILI talks to two refugees who escaped the tyranny of Afghanistan's Taliban militia. They recently arrived in Australia by boat but their ordeal is far from over.

In August 1999, Safar Ali awoke near a roadside amongst a pile of 12 blood-soaked bodies. Ali had been unconscious for many hours and could hardly believe he was alive. His muscles were swollen and some of his joints were dislocated. In this state, walking was impossible so Ali crawled to the road and waited for a passing vehicle to take him back to his family home.

Sixty-two year old Ali had endured a night of savage beating by Taliban soldiers who had caught him trying to escape across the Afghan border into Pakistan. As an ethnic Hazara and Shiite Muslim, Ali was regarded as subhuman by the fundamentalist Taliban who now control most of Afghanistan. He had suffered decades of war in his country but since the Taliban had emerged from Afghanistan's post-communist chaos in 1994, Ali's life had become intolerable.

Ali spent three months in bed, recovering from his beating. He then pooled the savings from his transportation business, which amounted to about \$8000 US, and recruited a 'people smuggler' to ensure his successful escape from Afghanistan.

Two weeks later Ali found himself, with 27 other Afghan Hazaras, on a small rickety boat heading from Indonesia to Australia. Today he lives in the south western Sydney suburb of Auburn, as do many other Afghan refugees who arrived in Australia with the assistance of people smugglers.

Ghulam Nabi Afzali lives near Ali in a sparsely furnished two-bedroom unit that he shares with two other people. Afzali came to Sydney in September 2000 after a three-month stint as a fruit-picker in Western Australia. He worked nine hours a day, six days a week until his hands became so swollen he could no longer continue. It was a humbling experience for Afzali, an ethnic Hazara, who was previously a nurse in Afghanistan.

Until September 1999, Afzali lived with his wife and five children in the central Afghan town of Jaghuri. Two years before, the Taliban had conquered Jaghuri and Afzali's life had changed irrevocably. "When they dominated the whole area they started persecuting the people, they are arresting the people, torturing the people, even destroying the house of the people," says Afzali.

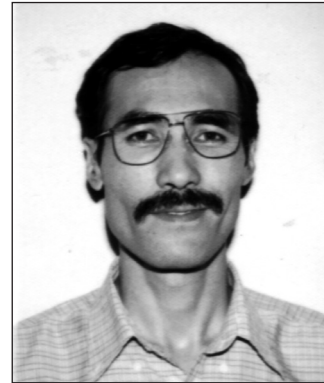
He and his brother were arrested twice by the Taliban, accused of hiding artillery on behalf of opposition groups. "They were beating me with a special torture device that's called dora. Metallic splints are inside a pipe...when they are beating they make no wound and no fracture but it is very painful".

After being released from custody the second time, Afzali went into hiding for several months, borrowing thousands of dollars from friends and relatives, until he had enough money to pay a smuggler to get him out of Afghanistan. He travelled overland to Karachi, Pakistan, and from there flew to Indonesia where he, and 14

or her homeland. "I didn't come only to save myself; my aim was to save my family as well," says Ali whose wife and 12 children remain in Afghanistan. But his hopes were soon crushed.

Upon arriving in Darwin in November 1999, Ali and his travelling companions were whisked away to a new detention centre located at Woomera, in the South Australian desert. The detention centre had only the most rudimentary facilities. For the first few weeks, detainees had to endure the scorching desert heat without any air-conditioning. To keep cool Ali wrapped himself in a wet sheet, which had to be dampened over and over again at half hourly intervals.

The weeks passed by and Ali had plenty of time to ruminate over the tragic events that forced him to flee Afghanistan. His mother and nephew had both been killed during



Ghulam Nabi Afzali

For a Hazara refugee, life in the Pakistani refugee camps can be as dangerous as life in Afghanistan itself

other Afghan refugees, caught a boat to Broome, Western Australia.

Ali and Afzali did not spend years in a camp in Pakistan, as many Afghan refugees did when they were escaping the communist regime in the 1980's. Pakistan is a supporter of the Taliban militia and many Taliban soldiers are recruited from the refugee camps in Pakistan. For a Hazara refugee, life in the Pakistani refugee camps can be as dangerous as life in Afghanistan itself. For that reason, Ali and Afzali decided to come to Australia directly.

Ali and Afzali held the firm conviction that the Australian government would help anyone who was genuinely escaping persecution in his

outbreaks of fighting. In 1994, Ali and his family moved to the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, which was subject to several battles as the Taliban tried to wrest control of the city from General Rashid Dostum. At the end of the third battle the Taliban were victorious and murdered approximately 1000 citizens, many of them ethnic Hazaras. Ali escaped death by hiring a taxi and escaping from Mazar-i-Sharif with his wife and children. "On the way I saw about 400 to 500 dead bodies lying on the ground," he says.

These memories churned around in his head as he sat, day after day, sobbing by the wire fence at Woomera. After seven and a half months, Ali was released from the ►



Female detainee at the Woomera Detention Centre

detention centre and provided with a bus ticket to Brisbane. The Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs decided that Ali was a genuine refugee according to international legal guidelines for determining refugee status.

Afzali had a similar experience. He spent five months in Port Hedland detention centre, the first two months in an isolation block, while he was being interviewed by immigration officials. The time in isolation was by far the worst, says Afzali. Magazines, newspapers, radio and television were all denied to him. He was allowed outdoors for a maximum of 15 minutes per day. The rest of the time he spent pacing up and down the corridors, watching videos and consoling fellow detainees. "One of my friends was getting crazy," says Afzali. "He was always beating on the ground, beating his head".

Eventually, Afzali was transferred into the general detention area. Life improved marginally but he still had to endure hour-long queues at mealtime and contemptuous behaviour from security officers. "Most of the officers were very [verbally] abusive. I think the management of the ACM [who run the detention centre] or the Department of the Immigration never ask, never see and never want to see what is going on inside the detention centre," says Afzali. He

describes his treatment in Port Hedland detention centre as "another kind of torture".

After hours of extensive and gruelling interviews by immigration officers, Afzali was also deemed a genuine refugee. But Ali and Afzali have not been granted permanent residency in Australia. Instead they have been given three-year temporary protection visas (TPVs).

Australia had granted TPVs to all successful refugee applicants in the early 1990s but the policy was considered unworkable and overturned before the expiry of the first visas granted. However in October 1999 this temporary visa subclass was reintroduced as a means of deterring 'boat people' coming predominantly from the Middle East.

Recipients of TPVs, such as Ali and Afzali, are not able to access the full range of social security benefits and immigration services. They are able to work but they are not able to attend the free English lessons available to other refugees so their prospects of finding work are greatly diminished. The TPV holder has no family reunion rights so Ali and Afzali will not be able to bring their wives and children to join him in the next three years. If they decide to go overseas during the three-year period they will be denied reentry into Australia.

Refugee advocacy body, the Ref-

ugee Council of Australia, strongly opposes the reintroduction of TPVs. They believe that the policy is creating two categories of refugees, with the TPV holders missing out on many of the rights and entitlements of other refugees. "They will be left in limbo for several years...This will have a significant impact on their long term settlement prospects and their psychological health, particularly if they are victims of torture and trauma," wrote the Council in a November 1999 position paper.

For Afzali, the worst aspect of the TPV is that he is denied reentry rights to Australia. He desperately wants to travel to Pakistan or Iran so that he can help his wife and children escape from Afghanistan while they wait to come to Australia. Meanwhile, he can only contact them indirectly, by sending letters via his brother in Pakistan who organises for the letters to be taken into Afghanistan by friends or acquaintances. The formal mail system has been decimated by the Taliban and the nearest telephone exchange is 400 kilometres from his wife's home.

Afzali is anxious to repay the debts he acquired paying off the people smuggler and provide financial support to his wife and children. He has recently been given a security guard's license and has started doing casual shift work in a printing company. All his savings are sent back to Afghanistan.

In September 2000, Ali travelled from Brisbane to Sydney, hoping that he would be able to find work in the larger city. He realises that at the age of 63 and without any English it will be difficult to find employment but he is prepared to do anything. He has dyed his white hair black and shaved off his beard in an attempt to make himself more appealing to potential employers but so far, he remains unemployed.

Ali is trying hard to make the best of things in Sydney so that in 30 months he can apply for permanent refugee status. Maybe then, he will be able to reunite with his family: "I don't have any wish or any desire [for the future] except to bring my family to Australia. This is all that I want". ■