

Dear friends,

After a year and a half of service to the mission, I'm leaving you.

These have proven to be extremely interesting, frequently challenging, times for me. Let me briefly recall the highlights.

I was once a free spirit. I worked for a small cultural heritage organization in Afghanistan in the year 2000, traveling all around the country on public transport without any means of communications, to survey monuments and archaeological sites. I lived in a big apartment among the carpet sellers of Chicken Street where in those days, before the arrival of the International Shopping Around Force, I was practically the only client. I could not penetrate the closely guarded international agencies, so I had gone native. I learnt Dari in the first months, and got a crash course – total immersion – in local mores, including learning to urinate in the squatting position. That decreases one's chances of getting hit by a stray rocket in a most embarrassing moment.

But then, as I was on my way out to girlfriends, ham sandwiches and bars back home, the great UN beckoned to me. I was recruited by Vendrell, then Head of Mission. He was keen to get Afghanistan experts on board (it did not take much to be seen as one) and did not judge what a danger I could become to the mission. Or, rather more likely, he actually felt sympathy for mavericks and loose cannons.

UN headquarters then did a speedy job, as usual, and it only took 7 months to get my recruitment processed, thanks to Mr. Vendrell's excellent contacts in New York. I had given up on the job and was getting settled in Paris. And then I got the call from Personnel, exactly two days before I was getting married. Wonderful timing! Happily, my wife is as intrepid as I am, and had no objections following me to this savage, heathen part of the world.

Hearing about my recruitment, my friends in Afghanistan taunted me that I was getting a job good for people in retirement age. UNSMA hadn't been capable of advancing the cause of peace in the country for the past decade. In those years its main activity had been to change the name of the mission several times, and strenuously opening some offices which were then promptly closed again by the Taliban. Mr. Vendrell had publicly called the Civil Affairs Officers "the eyes and the ears of the Secretary General", which of course made us very welcome guests with the paranoid Taliban. Our work plan therefore consisted of spending two weeks per month in the UNICA guest house in Kabul (or for the unfortunate ones Faizabad) and then the other two weeks driving UN cars around Islamabad and dropping by in the office to browse the internet.

It seemed like a nice job description to me. But I was unlucky, for I had hardly been with the mission for a month and a half when everything changed. On 11 September I had been meeting officials at the Taliban Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and we had been discussing the monumental changes that might follow the (at that time still

rumored) assassination of Commander Massud. I had also attended a session of the trial of the four international Shelter Now staff that had been imprisoned, accused of Christian proselytism. We were all very gloomy about the prospects for this country and our work in it, feeling the Taliban were now posed for a full takeover of the country. As a result they were becoming tougher and tougher on westerners and their sympathizers, and the visiting Arab fighters that were later to become known as "Al Qaeda" were increasingly threatening foreign aid workers. This gloom had hardly been alleviated by the surprise supplying of the UNICA bar, thanks to the American diplomatic envoy covering the Shelter Now trial. He had dug up a significant amount of cartons of beer hidden in the American Embassy. They had expired half a decade ago, and you couldn't drink the flaky bits in the bottom of the can, but after years without beer in UNICA the regulars (like me) were very pleased.

As I walked into UNICA that Tuesday evening, I found everybody huddled around the TV, eyes wide open with awe. As we saw first one tower crumble, and then the other, we realized that the focus of world attention was now going to shift towards us... that our lives and work were going to change... and that we would be evacuated the following day. And we were.

I had the dubious honor of being evacuated three times in less than a month. I was first redeployed in Peshawar, where anti-Western feelings were running high. After a couple of days the UN evacuated back to Islamabad. Then I was sent to Quetta, to reinforce Zaved, our civil affairs officer there who was holding the front line all alone. On 7 October, the US decided to attack Afghanistan – and a mob of Taliban sympathizers decided to retaliate against foreigners in Quetta. Zaved had shortly before rented an office/house which, luckily, had no UN sign on it, and our car was not visible from the street. We didn't have any guards because the UN person in charge of security had been unable to arrange it.

We watched hiding behind the curtains as a large angry mob walked through our narrow street, trashing all on the way (including a civilian car we'd rented the day before) and then went on to first pellet the UNHCR office, and then burn the UNICEF office around the corner. We trembled at the thought that one person in the crowd would happen to know that ours was the political office of the UN. I had planned an escape route over the roof – but we never needed to use it.

When all was over and the mobs had receded the UN security officer, who had forgotten all about us, made a daring rescue operation and proceeded to lock us up in the Serena Hotel for a few days, before we were again evacuated to Islamabad.

During the war our small UNSMA team was extremely busy trying to find out what was happening and what to do next. To a certain degree the conception and the execution of an adequate response to quickly unfolding events was our responsibility. We were thus all over the place, secretly meeting Taliban officials looking for redemption, haranguing groups of Afghans eager to return to a free Afghanistan, gathering information about what was happening in the country at the bus-stops, providing input on post-war strategies to headquarters, writing daily (yes!) reports to HQ, reading up on other peace processes elsewhere, and hotly debating amongst ourselves (the "Afghanistan experts") what the future regime should look like.

At the end of November 2001, barely two weeks after the Taliban had left, I was sent to Kabul to reopen our office (now "compound A") and get it prepared for the swift expansion that was foreseen. I was accompanied by Dr. Karl Fischer, who had the key to refraining me and regularly, throughout my mission, brought me back on track with his wise words. "Boy, you shoot too fast" he would say, a bit amused at my foolhardiness.

Compound A had been rented by UNAMA a couple of months before we left the country, and in those months practically nothing had happened there. No internet, of course, but also no heaters, only 4 old cars, no supplies of anything, not even floor carpeting – and, as I soon found out, no budget to improve the premises. To top it, half of the staff – they had been given permission to flee the bombing and come back when they reckoned it safe – was missing. I was the only international. And of course it was Ramadan. Those were the inputs. The expected outputs were: get the office ready for the arrival of Mr. Brahimi and an expanded mission, meet many visitors at the far-away Bagram airport, accompany them on their visits to the local power-brokers as Bonn was being negotiated and the transfer of power prepared, support civil society (I was civil affairs officer), organize the protocol for important visitors, answer to the queries of the diplomatic community and the Afghan rulers anxious to know what the UN was cooking up for them, avoid hundreds of journalists, etc. And as if it was not enough, I had organized a "Peace Delegation" of Afghan professionals from Peshawar, who were organizing one big meeting after the other in our office, and sleeping there too.

There were many memorable moments. Some of the visitors, like one big Armenian cigar-smoking peace-keeping heavyweight, expected me to provide headquarters-level services, such as last-minute extra rooms in the completely overbooked UNICA and ensuring the vehicles in the motorcade picking up Mr. Brahimi in Bagram were in protocol order. When Mr. Brahimi came he was dismayed that I abandoned him as soon as I could deliver him and his entourage to the Guesthouse. I was in a complete panic because there were no heaters in the offices, no food to be served, no plates to eat it on, not enough cars to bring them around and the meetings of the afternoon had yet to be confirmed. He summoned me to participate in his meetings with Fahim, Rabbani, Sayyaf and others, as UNSMA representative in Kabul. Luckily I did attend some of these groundbreaking meetings.

Mr. Brahimi was making this trip to "sell" the Bonn agreement to the Afghan leaders who had not attended it. Sayyaf, for example, proclaimed in a menacing tone that "the Islamic color of this agreement is too weak". As he spoke some boorish person sitting next to him fell asleep and started snoring. This man was to become Minister. As to Rabbani, he was furious that he was going to be ejected from the President's seat, to which he had been clinging on for the last 9 years. For half an hour he kept us nailed to our seats in the cold, dark presidential palace – without electricity – as he ranted and raged against the unfairness of this arrangement. "You said that you were only going to have preliminary talks about a peace settlement in Bonn... this agreement has no legitimate basis because I, the President, have not been consulted... another round of peace talks must be convened in Kabul" etc. Then, when his tirade was over, Brahimi finally spoke: "Ustad Rabbani; you know I have

the deepest respect for you. Like you, I am a mujahid. We've been friends for many years now. I was sure you would come along with us on this agreement. I am most happy to see I was right. Thank you" and he gave Rabbani his wily disarming smile. The President was indeed shut up, and we never heard much from him since then. On that day I learnt more about diplomacy than I had in my whole previous life.

Probably the most curious situation of those days arose when the individuals appointed as ministers in Bonn started flying into Kabul. They automatically came to the UN representative thinking that we had sorted everything out for them, since we had "fixed" Bonn. I remember seeing three bewildered people suddenly sitting in the office. After having run past them a couple of times I stopped to inquire who they were. They turned out to be Mohaqeq, Shaker Kargar and Mohammed Ali Razm, all three destined to become minister. They wanted to know where to go, what to do, where to eat... I rapidly contacted the President's office, where I heard that a whole floor of the Intercontinental Hotel had been rented to accommodate the future dignitaries. So I drove them to the Hotel – myself, there being no spare drivers. On the way, realizing that I, the "khariji", knew much more about their capital than they did, I gave them a little guided tour to keep them happy, feeling quite apologetic about the treatment they were getting.

Upon inquiring in the Intercontinental I heard what I had feared, namely that they had received no order to keep any rooms free for future ministers, let alone a whole floor. And all rooms were rented out to well-paying journalists. I had of course no UN funds to rent rooms. Appealing to the receptionists' civic sense of helping their future government had no result, so eventually I spoke to the manager on duty and told him that one of the guests, Mohaqeq, could easily bomb the hotel to smithereens if he was displeased; and that this other, Shaker Kargar, was becoming Minister of Water and Power, and... weren't these utilities useful to the Intercontinental? I wasn't sure whether my superiors would approve of such unconventional diplomacy, but I had many other things to do that day and was in a hurry. And these arguments proved to be effective.

Then, after 22 December 2001, the mission began to change. First there was Mr. Brahimi, sitting with us at the breakfast table in UNICA, with his cortege of assistants and bodyguards. Then more and more people started coming, especially in administration, and the UNSMA office began to look like any other UN office. Cars and communication equipment started arriving in large numbers. Big planes were landing every day at Bagram, and then at Kabul International Airport, bringing us ever more goodies, like furniture from Italy. I started seeing people around whom I didn't know – and, more disturbingly, who didn't know me. UNSMA gradually evolved into UNAMA. UNICA, bursting at its seams, started to spill over, first into other UN guesthouses, and eventually into private houses.

But our political team remained dramatically understaffed. Anders, Thomas, Michael, Robin and I were the core team. There was Zaved in Kandahar, Jan in Herat, Sergiy in Kunduz, then (later) Mervyn in Mazar, Kawun in Jalalabad, and Mark Pont, Guido and Rina ... and that was pretty much it until the Loya Jirga. And our new boss. One day in March, a highly energetic, sprightly man introduced himself to us: Jean, the

Deputy SRSR for Pillar 1, made quite an impression. He was more elegant than the rest of us combined, and had this organized, professional way that revealed all the rest of us for what we were: amateurs. Hard working, well intentioned, capable, highly informed and overall rather effective; but amateurs. NGO-ish, gone native, overly principled, completely individualistic amateurs. We had managed quite well considering the odds against us: putting together the Special Independent Commission despite the Government, getting them set up to start working despite the UNDP who tightly managed their funds, and keeping them more or less on track despite their highly anarchic, egotistic and disorganized predisposition. Our officers in the regions, without cars, without communications, without money, were somehow managing to keep us informed of what was happening there. But anyone coming from headquarters would have been baffled by how we were doing it. Jean was going to arrange that. If not re-organize us – that would have been highly disruptive – at least provide a façade of command and control that would slowly materialize, as the mission kept growing.

The Loya Jirga! What an incredible effort that was. I have read somewhere that in Bosnia the UN took a year to organize elections, and that altogether 2700 people were hired to work on them. In Afghanistan, a country much, much bigger, with daunting communication problems, with no idea of a census – are there 16 or 26 million Afghans living here? – with a large, uncounted trans-border/refugee population, not to mention IDPs and nomads, with a fragile, fragmented society prone to renewed conflict, we had to organize and implement an electoral process that would take place in each and every district of the country, in four months, with the handful of internationals mentioned. To give an idea, we started out believing there were about 320 districts in the country, only to find out, progressively, that there were about 380! And the Loya Jirga Commission was usually more harmful than helpful in organizing this process. All of the credit for not only having them organize it, but also make it seem to the rest of the world that the Commission members were actually doing it themselves, must go to Michael and Thomas, who for four months disappeared from our view as they were “assisting” the Loya Jirga Commission night and day, literally.

I got the tasks of making the budget for the whole operation, dealing with the UNDP to release the money, occasionally participating in fund-raising activities with the donors, establishing the lists of equipment to be procured and then procuring it (from Denmark), drawing up lists of Afghanistan experts who were to monitor the process, contact them, help The Asia Foundation recruit them, and assisting in many other fields. In the middle of all this, Zaved came back from Kandahar. He was so fed up of fielding it all alone in Kandahar, without any support from the Center, taking the flak of the local authorities for the insensitivity to Pashtun demands of the UN-assisted Loya Jirga process, that his health actually began to suffer. He was determined not to return, so I replaced him, not unhappy to get back into the field.

Now, this “brief summary of highlights” is starting to get long, and if I “briefly narrate” what happened in Kandahar, it would at least double in length. The night and day effort to organize the elections in 50 districts in this enormous region, the continuous tug-of-war with the regional Loya Jirga team to accept my unwarranted

Germanic interference in their happy-go-lucky Afghan approach to organization, the tricky negotiations with dissatisfied local authorities, the lightning trips to provincial capitals and to monitor district elections... that would fill at least two pages. If I add the extremely complicated story of how I undertook to organize and pay for the rehabilitation and furnishing of three big municipal buildings to be ready (in only five weeks) to accommodate thousands of delegates elected in phase 1, to find myself let down by the UNDP who didn't come up with the promised funding; how I was threatened by the mayor - himself allegedly assailed by his creditors - who told me he wrote a letter to Karzai and Brahimi asking them to sack me for non-respect of agreement; if I relate how I traveled to Kabul and actually broke a chair on the desk of a Loya Jirga Secretariat member to get him to sign an order for the release of 70,000\$, and rushed back with the money and thus saved the day; well, that will make for an additional two pages. On the other hand, I could illustrate how I learnt to appreciate the truth of the age-old adagio "work hard, play hard" and what crazy techno parties we held in my grotesquely luxurious room in the UNICA guesthouse in Kandahar: I could easily have 10 to 20 people dancing in the bathroom alone. But there were never more than 3-4 of us.

Or, then again, I could be more serious and talk about the electoral process itself. But there's no need to do that, because with Cyrus Hodes, one of the International Observers allotted to me, we made a movie that says it all: "Of course, I voted for my uncle: Loya Jirga in Kandahar". By the way, VHS Video cassette copies are now available.

I hope you realize that I've saved you at least 5 pages extra reading. Now, back to Kabul.

The Loya Jirga was definitely a turning point for all involved, although on the surface, it resulted in an unexpected continuity of the Bonn regime. The delegates, after having gone through an electoral process that was probably the most democratic and representative one that Afghan History has ever seen, were blatantly disenfranchised. After having being told for months that they were to decide on three matters - the Head of State, the structure of government and the key posts - they were not allowed to decide on any of these issues. Instead their voices were silenced (and drowned) by the last-minute admission of governors, warlords and secret service gooks, who kept a careful eye on them. The Loya Jirga degenerated into a senseless series of speeches meant for the self-aggrandizement of those delivering them, until the Loya Jirga Chairman, Qassimyar, and President Karzai threw a bone of contention among the delegates - the formation of a National Assembly - that actually managed to split the delegates among ethnic lines. Until then the elected delegates had shown a remarkable sense of national unity.

Sharing the disappointment of the elected delegates, who were highly critical of the role the UN had played, were most of the "Old Hands" who had played such an active part in getting the electoral process organized. The chance to replace the Coalition government that had come out of Bonn with a government of national unity, or a regime more akin to it, had been forsaken. The UN, maybe following the cue given by the US special envoy, had seemingly given in to threats by some of the factional

leaders that they would not accept the results of the Loya Jirga if the latter would be contrary to their interests. Peace had prevailed over justice, it was said, implying that the demand for justice would throw the country into renewed conflict. Implying, in fact, that the two can be separated, that one can have peace without justice. The Loya Jirga, it was smugly said, had historically been a rubber-stamping exercise: it was not a democratic tradition. So then, we asked, why was the UN involved in organizing it? Besides, this is not completely true. Loya Jirgas convened by strong rulers might have been exercises in legitimizing that ruler's decisions, but those convened in times of leadership problems had been discussion and negotiating forums for electing a new leadership.

Anyhow, we woke up. We amateurs woke up to the fact that professional, high politics were steering the game, not the Afghan people. Our role, which we had seen as interpreting the aspirations and intentions of the Afghan people – including, but not limited to, their power brokers – made no sense anymore. Sometime later, in a two-day UNAMA integration meeting, Jean tactlessly but appropriately reminded us that we were international civil servants, which is not a nice thing to say to people who believe they're Lone Rangers. The fun days were over. We could either try to find a slot in the mission where we would feel at ease, or move on. I was put into the position of the desk officer reporting to New York, whence I could innocuously exercise my fiction-writing skills. Most importantly, the input we could provide into the political process was neglected, despite our extensive terrain knowledge.

In the meanwhile, we got a lot of new colleagues, most of them specialists on Guatemala where - by the strangest of coincidences - Jean had been head of the political mission. Knowledge of Afghanistan came to be considered quite superfluous. Instead Pillar 1 became a great place to improve one's Spanish. I knew enough Spanish and felt it was time to move on. The balance had tipped towards a regular UN peace mission which, given the UN's track record in these matters, does not necessarily bode well for Afghanistan. In Spanish there's an expression: "de Guatemala a Guatepeor" which means "from Guate-bad to Guate-worse" (one could adapt that to Jalala-bad) and that's a place I didn't need to help this country go.

So I left, not before having been offered a nice other job. I hope you will be able to come to the inauguration of the Kabul Cultural Center which I plan to open somewhere in May or June. Until then: Goodbye!

Robert Kluyver