

The Irish Times - Tuesday, May 10, 2011

Courageous Afghan separates rights from wrongs

Violence and corruption have not dimmed Sima Samar's optimism about human rights, writes **BEN FARMER** in Kabul

SIMA SAMAR receives a threatening phone call almost every day because she dares to say women should have rights and murderers should face justice.

The harassment is not from Taliban rebels, but from the former warlords of Hamid Karzai's western-bankrolled government who want her silenced.

They are angered by her suggestions that Afghanistan can have peace only if past outrages are acknowledged, if the rule of the gun is ended and the powerful abide by the law. Their threats are evidence that even the most basic human rights are rejected by many powerful figures nearly 10 years after the Taliban regime was ousted with promises of a bright democratic future.



Sima Samar will travel to Ireland next month to collect the Tipperary Peace Convention award.
Photograph: Shah Marai/AFP

In such a climate, being Afghanistan's most prominent advocate for human rights is a dangerous role. "In a country like Afghanistan, where people still hold guns or run illegal armed groups and the rule of law is not in place yet, it's not an easy job," the 54-year-old doctor acknowledges with some understatement.

"You just increase the daily danger for yourself when you talk against these powerful people and warlords."

As if to underline her words, the fortified Kabul office of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, where she talked to The Irish Times, is ringed by blast walls and secured by armed guards.

Her role as chair of the commission follows 30 years of similarly confrontational work as head of her own Shuhada charity educating and treating Afghan women.

Her career has earned a string of international awards and last year saw her tipped as a potential Nobel Peace Prize winner. The prize went to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo, but in January the Tipperary Peace Convention added to Samar's awards with its 2010 international peace prize.

Announcing the award, the convention said Samar had "devoted her life to fighting for freedom and democracy in Afghanistan, putting her life in immense risk and overcoming numerous obstacles for the welfare of oppressed women and children".

"She has led a life full of firsts, displaying remarkable courage and commitment in improving the lives of Afghan girls and women and has refused to yield on principle – even at the risk to her own life."

The prize will give her "more courage to continue the work I am doing for human rights and peace in a country like Afghanistan", she says graciously, and she intends to visit Ireland to collect it next month. Sadly, she and her small band of fellow human rights advocates may need all the help they can get in the coming years.

The hopes for peace and justice that accompanied the end of Taliban repression in 2001 have been swamped by a tide of corruption and violence.

Samar is proud of what has been achieved in education and healthcare and says even the country's deeply flawed elections were a step forward.

But fragile gains that have been made elsewhere now seem to be threatened by the West's haste to quit a military and political quagmire.

"What the international community promised to the people of Afghanistan and what they delivered is quite different," she says. "The promise was quite big and what they delivered was quite small."

The rhetoric and hope about the future of Afghanistan in 2001 have been replaced by a scaling-back of ambitions to build a state which international officials now euphemistically call "Afghan good enough".

"Honestly, they have never been very strong on human rights," she said. "Some delegations come and say 'We are fighting against al-Qaeda, it's clearcut, we are not here to build democracy for you or build a nation'. This is really sad. They cannot win the war against al-Qaeda unless they have strong state institutions in Afghanistan."

Samar fears that western leaders facing growing domestic hostility to the cost of their Afghan venture are willing to make concessions to the Taliban to cut a hasty peace deal. Areas such as women's rights and a commitment to hold war criminals accountable seem destined to be sacrificed first.

A row over women's shelters which the government wants to take under its control and run with almost prison-like severity is a foretaste of the betrayal to come, she warns.

To Samar, like many Afghans, the desire to see war crimes prosecuted, or at least acknowledged, is personal and cannot be cast aside.

On January 28th, Hamida Barmaki, a colleague at the Human Rights Commission, went into a central Kabul supermarket with her family to pick up some groceries.

Moments later a Taliban suicide attacker opened fire, threw at least one grenade and then detonated his bomb harness.

Barmaki, her husband and all four children were among up to 14 killed in the attack.

"Peace without justice is unsustainable, anywhere in the world," Samar says.

"I just lost my colleague with her whole entire family. Her mistake was she was in a shop at the wrong time. The entire family is gone. The entire family: the mother, the father, four children.

"Who is responsible for that? Who will face justice for that?" Afghans were willing to forgive if necessary, she said, but not until crimes had been acknowledged as wrong.

Incredibly, in the face of such obstacles, Samar says the early years of her career were even harder. She graduated from Kabul University's medical college in 1982 and was soon treating patients in the remote central regions of the country.

After fleeing to Pakistan in 1984, she witnessed a complete lack of medical facilities for Afghan women among the millions of refugees who had escaped the brutality of the Red Army.

She started a hospital for women and children in Quetta, but the ultra-conservative mujahideen parties who controlled the camps frowned upon her as both a woman and one of the repressed Hazara ethnic minority.

"Back then at least [the mujahideen commanders] didn't have a legitimate position, but now they have legitimate positions inside the government." In 1989, she launched the Shuhada Organization, which has grown to encompass six clinics and three hospitals for women and children in Afghanistan.

It ran underground teaching for girls during the Taliban government and now operates 71 schools inside the country and three for refugees in Quetta.

When the Taliban fell Samar was made minister for women's affairs during Karzai's interim government, before running the Human Rights Commission.

In March, her commission and the United Nations released another grim report on the suffering of Afghan people, disclosing that the civilian death toll from the war was at its highest ever since 2001.

Yet she still says she is optimistic about human rights.

“I think I am optimistic, because we have no other solution. At the end of the day we have to accept it. Sooner is better, with less destruction. Later will mean more human cost.”