AFGHANISTAN - A BACKGROUND

Afghanistan is a landlocked rugged mountainous country located in Central Asia. Afghanistan borders Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Indian Jammu and Kashmir (claimed by Pakistan) and the Uighur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang of China.

The population of Afghanistan is estimated at 25 million with another 6 million Afghan refugees living mostly in Pakistan and Iran. Almost half the population is under 15 years of age and life expectancy is less than 45 years. Afghanistan is one of the world’s poorest nations.

Afghanistan is ethnically and linguistically diverse as a consequence of 2000 years of the influence of nomads, traders, foreign invasions and super power political maneuverings. The invaders have included Indo-Aryans, Greeks (Alexander the Great), Persians, Arabs, Mongols (Genghis Khan), Turks, British, Russians and the Soviet Union. There are four major ethnic groups in Afghanistan: Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaris and Uzbeks. The country has two official languages: Pashto and Dari. In addition, other Indo-European and Turkic languages are spoken.

The Arabs introduced Islam in 652AD and by 1000AD Afghanistan had become a centre of Islamic power. Previously, Afghanistan was characterised by a number of religious influences including Zoroastrianism, a Persian monotheistic religion, Buddhism and Hinduism. Today, 99% of the population is of Islamic faith - the majority are Sunni Muslims.

The history of Afghanistan is marked by the aspirations of other nations and various Afghan tribal groups. The first unified Afghan state was established by the Pashtun Ahmad Khan Durrani who was elected king (shah) by a tribal council in 1747. By the beginning of the 19th century the Durrani dynasty was under threat from tribal chiefs, Sikhs from the Indian Punjab and Persians. The Barakzay dynasty ruled Afghanistan from 1837 until 1973. Zahir Shah, king from 1933 to 1973, was deposed in a coup led by his cousin Mohammed Daud Khan whilst the king was in Italy for medical treatment. Daud Khan proclaimed a republic with himself as President.

From the mid 1960s there had been pressure for a democratic change. In 1965, three students were killed during demonstrations. This provided the impetus for the establishment of The People’s Democratic Party and the coup which overthrew the king in 1973. When Daud Khan came to power he maintained the close ties that King Zahir Shah had established with the Soviet Union. This period saw the beginnings of activity by fundamentalist Islamic forces opposed to social reforms. The Afghan economy continued to deteriorate under Duad Khan, who was unable to deal effectively with the various ethnic groups and tribal leaders. Duad Khan was assassinated by Afghan army officers in 1978.

Nur Mohammed Taraki, supported by the Soviets, took over as leader. His government announced a number of reforms including equal rights for women.
and land reform but had little credibility or internal support. Political assassinations continued with the killing of Taraki in 1979 by supporters of his so-called ally Hafizullah Amin who was also killed later that year.

Afghan government was collapsing under the pressures of internal rivalry, economic chaos and increasing resistance from Islamic fundamentalists. This instability provided the impetus for the Soviets to invade Afghanistan on December 25th 1979 and install the puppet government of Babrak Karmal. Various Afghan groups supported by the United States, the United Kingdom, China and Arab states provided fierce resistance to the Soviet regime. These fighters were known as the Mujahedeen, meaning holy warriors.

Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet President, faced increasing internal opposition to the war with its high casualties and burgeoning costs. Gorbachev recognised that the war was a barrier to his objective of achieving improved relations with the West. In 1988 Gorbachev withdrew Soviet troops. It is estimated that nearly one million Afghans died during the war against the Soviets.

The withdrawal of Soviet troops did not end the suffering of the Afghan people. A civil war followed between the various groups that had resisted the Soviets and the government of Mohammed Najibullah. Najibullah, a former head of the secret police, became President in 1987 but struggled to maintain power under the pressure of Mujahadeen resistance. In 1992 he resigned and was later murdered. The civil war continued with the various factions and ethnic groups vying for power.

The fundamentalist Islamic Taliban emerged as the most powerful faction and by 1996 they had taken control of 95% of the country including the capital Kabul. The word Taliban comes from the Persian *tālib* meaning religious student. The Taliban’s objective was to make Afghanistan the “purist” Islamic state in the world. To this end, the Taliban banned music, films and television. They made women wear the chadari (or burqa, a head-to-toe garment completely hiding the body) and men grow beards. The Taliban banned most women from working, banned education for girls beyond primary school and forbade women to be seen in public unless escorted by a male relative.

The Religious Police were established to enforce these edicts. The police subjected women to public beatings if amongst other “crimes” they showed their wrists or ankles or were caught begging. The Religious Police also organised public executions of women found guilty of adultery. These executions took place at the Kabul soccer stadium where women were blindfolded, made to kneel and then shot in the head. The Taliban destroyed art works and museum collections, and in March 2001 two giant statues of Buddha carved into the Bamian mountains in the 3rd and 5th centuries were destroyed. The Taliban considered the statues the “gods of the infidels”.

The Taliban have appeared to support international terrorism. They called Osama bin Laden, who first came to Afghanistan from Saudi Arabia to fight the Soviets, a “guest” in their country. They refused to hand him over to the Americans for his alleged role in the bombing of American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya which killed 224 people.
In 1998, the United States launched a missile attack on terrorist targets in Afghanistan but failed to kill bin Laden. In 1999 and 2001 the United Nations imposed sanctions on the Taliban regime, however these actions did not change the situation in Afghanistan.

After bin Laden’s alleged involvement in the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in the USA on September 11th 2001, President George W. Bush asked the Taliban to hand him over. The Taliban refused and the United States launched a military assault on Afghanistan. This assault had two agendas: the destruction of Osama bin Laden and his terrorist organisation and the ousting of the Taliban regime. The Taliban were defeated but as of the beginning of 2004 there is little evidence that bin Laden has been killed.

A new government is now in place in Afghanistan. Many of the restrictions imposed by the Taliban have been removed. In June 2002, the Loya Jirga (the traditional grand assembly of 1,650 Afghans) elected Hamid Karzai, an urbane influential Pashtun, President. The gathering ushered in a new era for Afghanistan. One of the candidates for the Presidency was a woman and this time a leader was determined not by a coup or assassination but by a vote of representatives of the people. Ironically the former king, Zahir Shah, whose overthrow in 1973 set the scene for 30 years of turmoil has returned from exile in Italy. Suggestions that he will again take the throne have been denied by Karzai.

Thirty years of war have had a devastating impact on Afghan life. Afghanistan is the most heavily landmined country in the world. It has suffered economic devastation, social and political chaos and its citizens have been denied the most basic freedoms. Six million Afghans have fled their country, many in fear of their lives. Since the year 2000 approximately 3000 Afghan refugees have sought a safe haven in Australia. In 2000/2001 more Afghans applied to the Australian government for protection visas than from any other country. Many Afghan refugees are Hazaris, the ethnic group targeted for persecution by the Taliban. It is estimated that the Taliban murdered over 50,000 Hazaris.

Afghans have been coming to Australia since 1838. They played a significant role in the exploration of the outback. The Ghan, the famous train that travels from Adelaide to Alice Springs, was named in honour of the Afghans who worked to build the railway. The first white man to climb Uluru was accompanied by his Afghan camel driver. 

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