

"The U.S. government has never supported democratic organizations..."

Elsa Rassbach interviews Zoya of the Foreign Committee of RAWA

Despite more than seven years of U.S. and NATO occupation, the members of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) must still use pseudonyms to protect their organization, their families, and their work to liberate the women of Afghanistan.

"Zoya" is the pseudonym used by a member of RAWA's Foreign Committee who has traveled to many countries, including the U.S., Spain, and Germany, representing the organization. She received international acclaim with the 2003 publication her dramatic life story: "Zoya's Story: An Afghan Woman's Battle for Freedom," with John Follain and Rita Cristofari.

Last year Zoya visited Germany to support the campaign of the German peace movement for the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan. Elsa Rassbach, a U.S. citizen living in Berlin, interviewed her.

What led you to decide to work with RAWA?

I'm from the generation of the war crimes in Afghanistan. I was born in 1979, and that was the year of the Soviet invasion. My generation has never enjoyed democracy, freedom, secularism, or peace in Afghanistan. After the withdrawal of the Soviets and the fall of its puppet regime, the darkest part of our history began when fundamentalists took power in 1992. That was the start of the odious part of our history, which continues until this day. Between 1992 and 1996, 80,000 civilians were killed in Kabul under the domination of the Northern Alliance, due to infighting of fundamentalist groups. They turned Kabul into a graveyard, where you could only see tears, fear, destruction, and blood. Then, when the Taliban came into power, they even raped 70 year-olds and four year-olds. The main reason I joined RAWA was the misery and pain of our people.

The U.S. government has always played with the destiny of our poor people and has supported criminals, terrorists and the worst enemies of our people. During the Cold War, the U.S. created, nurtured, funded, and supported these groups against the Soviets. This spread misery and death in Afghanistan over the past three decades.

I was a war orphan; I lost my parents as the result of the war. I studied in RAWA's school, the Watan ("The Homeland") School, in the refugee camp in Pakistan. They had a school for girls and one for boys. I was there through the 6th grade. I became aware of RAWA through the school. I found RAWA to be the most serious, honest, radical, anti-fundamentalist, democratic organization fighting for justice and women's rights. I found it to give a voice to Afghan women who were even not regarded as human beings by fundamentalist gangs. The suffering, destitution and awful plight of my fellow countrywomen persuaded me to continue to fight against the brutal fundamentalists and for women's rights and democracy.

I began with RAWA at age 14. I am now 28 and a member of the Foreign Committee. I'm in my third year of university, studying law.

What is RAWA?

RAWA was first established in 1977 by Afghan intellectual women, headed by Meena, to fight for equality of men and women and against male chauvinism that was and is being practiced in our society. Most women were illiterate and took literacy courses and then decided to work with RAWA. Poor, uneducated women such as farmers' widows come to RAWA for help. We encourage them to fight for their rights and get political education.

In 1979 RAWA fought against the Russians and to expose the Russian puppet government through demonstrations, leaflets, and strikes. In 1987, RAWA's leader, Meena, was killed by agents of KHAD (Afghanistan branch of KGB) with direct help of the Islamic Party of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Our demonstrations were attacked, even in Pakistan. We had to live in a clandestine way. From 1992 to the present, we have fought any brand of Islamic fundamentalists, who are the main cause of our miseries and problems.

Now RAWA has hundreds of members as well as a large number of supporters, not only in Afghanistan, but all around the world. Being strongly against the fundamentalist warlords, the Taliban and the puppet government of Hamid Karzai, we still can't work publicly in Afghanistan, and we continue to work semi-underground. In Afghanistan, we don't use the name RAWA for orphanages, literacy programs for women, handicraft centers for widows, or health care centers. The Afghan intelligence agency, which is run by warlords, follows us everywhere and creates problems for our members and supporters. Some of our supporters have been imprisoned and tortured for just having copies of our magazine with them.

The U.S. government has never supported democratic organizations like RAWA. Up until now, we have received not a penny from the U.S. or any other government. At the same time, we have the honor of being supported by the peace-loving people of the U.S. and other Western countries. We have received donations of \$5 and even \$1000 for orphanages, schools and political work. We are proud to rely on the small donations of our supporters and well wishers in Afghanistan and abroad, which have a huge value for us. We have groups of dedicated supporters in many countries that really work hard to raise awareness and funds for RAWA projects.

What is RAWA's position regarding the U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan?

In 2001, the U.S. and its allies occupied Afghanistan under the beautiful slogans of "war on terror," "women's rights," "liberation" and "democracy." But when they installed the brutal and criminal warlords after the fall of the Taliban, everyone knew that Afghanistan had once again become a

chessboard for world powers. They have their long-term plans in Afghanistan, and the plight of our people, and especially of women, has been misused to legitimize the foreign military presence in our country.

The U.S. invaded Afghanistan to fulfill its geo-political, economic and regional strategic interests and to transform Afghanistan into a strong military base in the region. In the past seven years, these troops have even further complicated the situation of Afghanistan. Not only have they pumped millions of dollars into the pockets of savage warlords but the Taliban and other terrorist groups are more powerful today. They have turned Afghanistan into the opium capital of the world, and one of the reasons for invading Afghanistan was to get hold of this multi-billion-dollar drug business.

Afghan people have been badly betrayed by the U.S. and NATO in the past few years. Despite billions in aid, Afghan people are living under awful conditions that are worse than they were under the Taliban medieval rule. Afghanistan still faces a women's rights tragedy, and the everyday hardships of our masses are beyond imagination.

The U.S. and NATO have imposed a corrupt mafia, puppet government on the Afghan people, a government which is mostly comprised of warlords and drug lords. And now efforts are underway to share power with the Taliban and Islamic Party of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

The U.S. and NATO are killing thousands of our innocent people, while at the same time their operations have no impact on the Taliban, because as they are not really interested in peace and in stability in Afghanistan. The presence of the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups is in fact necessary for the U.S. and NATO in order to have a reason for their permanent presence in Afghanistan. Everyone knows that the U.S., a superpower, together with the biggest military pact in the world, NATO, could it is a matter of days, if not hours, defeat the Taliban and arrest Mullah Omer and Osama. But today they need such enemies to justify keeping their military machine in Afghanistan.

But even the foreign soldiers are the victims of the governments that send them to Afghanistan to be killed for nothing but guarding the benefits of multi-national corporations. These governments not only betray Afghans, but also their own citizens. They put in danger their own soldiers and spend taxpayers' money to push the region and the world towards more war and dangers. Here in Germany, I met a U.S. veteran who had been in Afghanistan. I told him that it would be important to the whole world that he tell his story. He cried and said, "Because of you, I'll go and talk." Many former U.S. veterans have shocking stories about on how they witnessed that in the name of "liberation," these troops have been committing war crimes.

The troops should be withdrawn as soon as possible. This is the first step. They should adopt less bloody alternatives. We don't want their so-called liberation and democracy. If these troops do not withdraw, we are sure that the Afghan people will have no other option but to rise up against them. Our people are already deeply fed up with the situation. The jokes being made in Afghanistan are that the Taliban are getting the most from this situation.

Would you not be afraid of a civil war if the U.S. and NATO withdrew from Afghanistan?

RAWA supports the call for the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO troops because occupation is not a solution. They are constantly killing civilians, even at a wedding party. Do you think we are not human beings and don't have hearts? What would Americans do if an occupier were killing so many civilians in the U.S.?

We have a good history in Afghanistan of throwing out occupiers, and this is a source of pride. But we have lost pride. Over 40 countries have invaded us. People are frustrated, and they think the first step is to get the invaders out. Some may not agree with the Taliban, but some are paid to fight, and often they are starving; others are brainwashed, for example in the religious schools.

If there is a withdrawal, there will probably be a civil war between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban, but that would not be any worse than what is going on now. When these troops pull out at least we will then no more be an occupied country. It is the duty of Afghan people to get rid of the internal enemies, but today, our internal enemies are backed and supported by the external enemies that are the U.S. and NATO.

The reason the fundamentalists are powerful is because they are always being supported by the U.S., which has given billions of dollars to the Northern Alliance, money that has gone into the pockets of warlords and drug lords. Today people are crying of hunger, selling their children for \$5, but where did the billions go?

What solutions would RAWA propose?

The withdrawal of military troops must be accompanied by other actions by governments, if they really want to help us as they claim. They must stop supporting any terrorist groups, including the Northern Alliance that destroyed Afghanistan before the Taliban came. There should also be sanctions on governments that support the Taliban, like Iran and Pakistan. Warlords should be brought to the International Court for crimes against humanity.

If they really have genuine concern for Afghanistan and want peace and stability in the country, the solution would be to support the democratic-minded organizations and individuals in Afghanistan, but in the past few years, much pressure has been put on such groups to give up. Today the democratic organizations are weak because no one helps them. If they received support, they would grow strong. And the democratic forces need to unite and fight against the fundamentalists.

The message of RAWA to freedom-loving people is to support the democratic organizations of Afghanistan. Freedom, democracy and justice cannot be enforced at gunpoint by a foreign country; they are the values that can be achieved only by our people and democracy-loving forces through a

hard, decisive and long struggle. Those who claim to donate these values to the Afghan people through force will only push our country into slavery. This is our responsibility: to stand up to fundamentalists and occupations.