

La Jolla Rotary school's future in Afghanistan is threatened

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The biggest threat facing the La Jolla Golden Triangle Rotary Club School in Afghanistan now is not the Taliban; it's the collapse of the country's economy.

The school, which was built and furnished by the local Rotary Club here, has been operating since 2004, educating boys and girls in separate class sessions supported financially by the Afghan government. Between 4,000 and 5,000 first- through 12th-grade students are registered at the school.

The Rotarians also set up computer labs for boys and girls in 14 public high schools and a computer training program in Nangarhar University, in Jalalabad, teaching male and female students English and Internet technology.

Stephen Brown, a retired San Diego attorney and past trustee of The Rotary Foundation, long has been a pillar of the education programs. He transfers money to Afghanistan at the end of each month to pay the salaries of about 24 staffers as well as expenses for Internet services, generator fuel, maintenance and repairs.

His last payment, a transfer of \$9,750, cleared the Afghan bank on July 31. The bank ceased operations later that same day.

"With our bank shut down, there is no way I could wire money there now," says Brown. "Opening a bank account was a major task even under the old government." He fears that with the Taliban in charge, U.S. banks won't be permitted to transfer money there due to anti-terrorist restrictions.

"I can be certain I couldn't go to my bank tomorrow and say, 'Wire money to Afghanistan,'" says Brown, who remains hopeful the United States will make good on its pledge to continue humanitarian support to the Afghan people and, perhaps, pick up the education program payments in which his club has been involved.

Meanwhile, despite fears and conflicting reports about the Taliban crackdown — especially its impact on female rights — the chancellor of Nangarhar University, where the Rotary-supported computer training center for college students is based, has relayed uplifting news.

“Our people running the program have been in touch with the new education leadership (under the Taliban),” Brown reports, “and they want to continue programs for both boys and girls at the university level and at the high school level.”

Taliban representatives in Nangarhar Province toured the computer facility and met with its operators. Not only was its IT training given a green light, the local Afghans involved in running the center for years have been advised that they will be presented a letter of commendation, says Brown.

Brown received an email Tuesday asking that the school programs, which are on hiatus for the summer, be resumed right away rather than waiting until the start of the fall semester.

He admits to being “totally surprised” by the terrorist group’s support for continuing education classes that include females. While promises of Taliban support had been voiced, though, Brown remains somewhat skeptical.

Fortuitously, the Taliban’s education point person is a graduate of Nangarhar University. Plus, the young daughter of one of his colleagues underwent vital heart surgery just over the border in India through another program recently launched by La Jolla Golden Triangle Rotarian Fary Moini, a former nurse who helped start and run the Jalalabad school programs.

All education programs, however, are in jeopardy. The Taliban takeover cut off international sources of funding to Afghanistan as well as foreign aid that was going to the previous government.

The nation’s looming financial crisis is not only affecting the Rotarians’ ability to transfer cash, but also the country’s business and civic infrastructure, and government services and salaries.

The Rotarian group and many others are adopting a wait-and-see posture. “They’re saying all the right things,” says Brown of the Taliban representatives, although he fears the Islamic terrorists may not speak with one voice and that infighting and factions are likely to develop.

Right now, he is spending much of his time filling out requests for Priority 2 (P-2) visas to move to the United States Afghans who work or have worked for Rotary-supported school programs there.

The public’s attention has been on the Special Immigration Visas (SIVs) created to safely remove and resettle Afghan translators and others under U.S. government employ in Afghanistan.

However, on Aug. 2, the U.S. State Department announced a P-2 visa designation that extends to many more Afghan nationals, including those who worked for U.S.-based nongovernmental organizations and their eligible family members.

Little attention is being focused on this P-2 refugee resettlement program, and there is no official estimate on how many thousands of Afghans may qualify to apply for P-2 visas.

However a veterans organization, the Association of Wartime Allies, with support from American University, released calculations on Wednesday. It estimates the number of Afghan refugees who qualify for SIVs to be about 65,000, while it estimates the broader pool of potential P-2 visa applicants and eligible family members to be between 198,000 and nearly 1.1 million people, depending on assumptions related to available data.

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