



U.S. Airmen Lead Afghan Army Women's Seminar

By Staff Sgt. Ian Carrier, USAF
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KABUL, Afghanistan, Feb. 27, 2008 – Two U.S. airmen are leading a weekly women's seminar for female Afghan National Army soldiers and civilian workers to help promote change in Afghanistan's male-dominated society.

Air Force Tech. Sgt. Lulu Tapia and Tech. Sgt. Natalie Cerchio, from 755th Expeditionary Support Squadron, are assigned as mentors to the Afghan National Army's Logistic Support Operations Command. They began their efforts by encouraging Afghan military women to wear their uniforms to work.

Eventually, the Afghan women began to look to the airmen for guidance, and they questioned the American women on their role in the U.S. military. Tapia came upon the idea to start a forum for the unit's Afghan women to voice their concerns. With the blessing of Afghan National Army Gen. Abdul Basir, commander of the Logistic Support Operations Command, the women's seminar began.

"Things are not the same as they were under the communist, mujahedeen and Taliban regimes," Basir said. "I think many Afghans in the U.S. and Europe think there is still the same discrimination. We have 90 female personnel in the area, and now we have a weekly seminar with the Americans."

Tapia said the support they receive from the leadership is important.

"We get a lot of support from the general," Tapia said. "That means a lot due to the cultural differences."



Afghan National Army Gen. Khotul, center, poses with U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Lulu Tapia, left, and Tech Sgt. Natalie Cerchio, both of 755th Expeditionary Support Squadron. The airmen are mentors at the Afghan Logistics Support Operations Command in Kabul and helped Afghan women start a weekly women's seminar. Photo by U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Ian Carrier

Main topics in the group's first meeting were dress and appearance, Tapia said. About 20 women showed up, but only three of them were in uniform. By the second meeting, about 10 were in uniform. At the latest session, there were nearly 50 participants, and more than half were in uniform.

Over the course of the last 6 weeks, the topics began to vary from uniform standards to other topics, such as training, physical training and professionalism. The women were encouraged to use their chain of command to gain credibility and address issues.

Guest speakers also are incorporated into the program. The guest speaker for the Feb. 23 session was Afghan National Army Gen. Khotul, who is not only the first female Afghan general, but also the first female Afghan paratrooper.

"I stand before you today a general, something I earned through hard work and many years serving my country," Khotul said. "I want to tell you ladies that you are the future of Afghanistan. Learn as much as you can, and request support from your officers. If you have questions, ask them. Work together; help each other, and be united. When you take care of yourself and take care of each other, you also take care of your leaders, and they, in turn, will take care of you."

The general also encouraged the women to look and behave as soldiers and look to the American women as role models. She thanked the airmen for their part in the seminars. "I offer thanks to our sisters for having left their families to come here and help us," Khotul said. "We very much appreciate them."

At the end of the seminar, the general conducted a commander's call with the Afghan army women, during which many of them voiced concerns including pay problems, promotion problems, housing and training. Khotul assured the women that, although change is slow, the problems would be addressed.

Basir also attended the meeting, as he does every week.

"It is my wish that I should help these women jump to the moon," Basir said. "And I shall request more military training to help them get promoted."

Mina, an Afghan National Army soldier with the pay grade of E-8, said she is very pleased with the seminars.

"I feel very good about these weekly meetings; they are positive," Mina said. "The more we work together, the better our situation. The more women we can get to join, the better our military will be."

The eventual goal is to have Afghan women running the seminars and not relying on Americans, Tapia said. At the conclusion of the meeting, the Airmen tasked the ladies to pick three members from their own ranks to lead the next seminar.

“I am really happy to be a part of this and to have gotten this started,” Tapia said. “We took an interest in them when no one else really had.”

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