



Bagram Hosts International Women's Day Observance

By Spc. Melissa M. Escobar, USA
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BAGRAM AIR BASE, Afghanistan, March 5, 2008 – Women's history month kicked off with a celebration of International Women's Day here March 3.



Afghan National Army Brig. Gen. Khatool Mohammadzai, Husn Banu Ghazanfar of the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs and U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Rodney Anderson, Combined Joint Task Force 82 deputy commanding general for support, cut a cake at the International Women's Day celebration at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan, March 3, 2008. Hundreds turned out to the festivities to celebrate the world's women and acknowledge women's contributions to peace and security. Photo by Master Sgt. Demetrius Lester, USAF

Combined Joint Task Force 82, 455th Air Expeditionary Wing Equal Opportunity and various civil-military operations sections sponsored the celebration, which consisted of speeches, a musical performance from an Afghan band and an Afghan fashion show. The theme of the celebration was "Investing in Women and Girls."

International Women's Day is an official holiday held on March 8 each year in 23 countries across Europe, Africa and Asia. The holiday commemorates the economic, political and social struggles and achievements of women worldwide. The occasion recognizes the world's women and acknowledges their contribution to peace and security, according to the official International Women's Day Web site.

Speaking for Afghanistan's Ministry of Women's Affairs, Husn Banu Ghazanfar updated the gathering of U.S. and French servicemembers and Afghan visitors on women's progress on an international scale. As a lecturer, poet and writer, Ghazanfar gave insight into the struggles that Afghan women have faced and continue to face.

Afghan National Army Brig. Gen. Khatool Mohammadzai is Afghanistan's first woman general and paratrooper in the ANA. With more than 500 jumps under her belt and a chest full of medals displaying her many accomplishments, Mohammadzai is a real-life representation of how women are gradually emerging in prominence in Afghan society. In a country where women traditionally have been suppressed and limited to roles that keep them in the home, Mohammadzai has broken the mold and jumped, literally, into a man's world.

"I am honored to be a part of this celebration and to be here in Bagram," she said. "I am proud to be here with my Afghan and international colleagues in celebrating this wonderful day. I congratulate the whole world's women and Afghan women on this beautiful and important day. This day is a sign that the women of the world are making huge progress."

The sense of importance on this day was felt by all who attended, women and men alike.

U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Rodney Anderson, CJTF 82's deputy commanding general for support, said it's important to celebrate International Women's Day. "It's especially important to celebrate (the holiday) in Afghanistan," he added, "to recognize the contributions and sacrifices that the Afghan women have made, and the contributions and sacrifices of the women who have deployed here to support them."

One of the women deployed to support the nation of Afghanistan is French Maj. Angelique Esperance, a contracting and legal officer with the French forces.

"It's a particularly important day today," she said. "Women have not had rights here, and today it's a feeling of freedom. We can show the Afghan women that we can do anything next to men. Where I am from, we are equal to men, and I hope that one day it will be the same here. I hope to see Afghan women take their place in society."

U.S. Air Force Senior Master Sgt. Debra Plocki, deployed from Robins Air Force Base, Ga., and serving here with the 455th AEW, spoke to the gathering about women in history. Plocki, who was born in the Panama Canal Zone, said she loves history and loves to read and understand where things come from.

"There's a sense of sisterhood, even with women across the world. I want to know what their life is like," Plocki said.

While the crowd took a break to pile their plates full of chicken and beef kabobs, white rice and a double-layered chocolate cake designed with 14 national flags, a local Afghan band called Hamahang performed traditional Afghan music.

Even though the six-piece band from Kabul is composed entirely of men, the musicians

know the importance of the celebration for women.

“I couldn’t wait for this day,” Jawaid Hamahang, the band’s lead singer and keyboardist, said. “I am very proud to play on this great day. I wished for such a day in Afghanistan.”

He chose a song titled “Woman” to play for the occasion. The song describes the importance of women in a society and their roles as mothers and wives.

With the conclusion of the band’s performance, designer and Kabul boutique owner Mina Sherzay took the stage to introduce her Afghan fashion show.

Sherzay, who was born in Kabul, moved to the United States in 1978, before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. As a mother of two daughters, Sherzay would design and make traditional clothing for herself and for her daughters.

In 2001, Sherzay decided to return to Afghanistan and open her boutique. Although she is an accomplished business woman, Sherzay’s goals were not met with the success of her business alone.

“The whole purpose of what I am doing is to economically empower Afghanistan’s women,” said Sherzay, who has established the Afghan Women’s Association and Afghan Women’s Federation.

Through her clothing and jewelry line, Sherzay said, she hopes to open the world’s eyes to the beauty of Afghanistan’s culture, which ultimately would bring more business to the women who create the line.

With the attention of the crowd and modernized music playing in the background, U.S. servicemembers and Afghans modeled Sherzay’s designer clothes down the runway. The designs ranged from traditional color-filled dresses to more modern earth-toned two-piece suits.

U.S. Army Spc. Erin Dotson, a cook with the 96th Aviation Support Battalion, 101st Combat Aviation Brigade, from Fort Campbell, Ky., was volunteered by her battalion commander to be one of Sherzay’s models.

“I wasn’t expecting to ever be dressed in these clothes, but it’s a nice honor,” she said wearing a modern two-piece suit with traditional jewelry. “It’s nice to get out of the kitchen and get involved. The clothes are very beautiful! And some of them are so modern, it’s like stuff that you can find ... back in the states. I plan on buying my jacket.”

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