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Afghans want peace, but they are caught between forces they can't control

By Zarlasht Halaimzai

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Britain and the US must establish a credible exit strategy or more innocent people will die in pointless acts of violence

On a visit to Afghanistan earlier this month, I spent an afternoon at Skateistan, a project in Kabul that offers some of the poorest children in the world a chance to be children. They come to Skateistan to play, skate and learn. What struck me about these kids was their display of both childish playfulness and a kind of maturity you can only get with years of experience.

Fourteen-year-old Khorshid embodied both of these qualities. When I met her – just a few days before she was killed by a suicide bomber – she approached me with a smile and asked if I could skate. When I said no, she immediately offered to show me how. As I tentatively got on the skateboard, propped up by Khorshid and Madina, her friend and fellow skater, she told me not to be scared.

This is the reality of people living in Afghanistan. Ordinary people tread the line between life and death every day. When they go out for work, or to buy groceries or to pick up their children from school there is a chance they will die on the way there or on the way back. Eleven years after international troops entered Afghanistan to "liberate" Afghans from the tyranny of the Taliban, Afghans still live in a state of war.

There are some things that have changed in the past decade. Returning to Afghanistan after 20 years living abroad, I was glad to see that Kabul, almost completely destroyed by two decades of war, is now rebuilt. The roads are paved and all around you see evidence of industry. Mobile phone companies are advertising their services on giant billboards on the side of the roads and posh supermarkets have sprung up all over Kabul to cater for its expat and foreign populations.

There is a bustling rhythm of life in Kabul. But all around there is also sinister evidence of violence. Security checkpoints sit every few hundred metres on streets. You can always hear the roar of military helicopters and planes and for me perhaps the most poignant sign of insecurity was that few women were out on the streets. They don't feel safe and you can't blame them. Suicide attacks, unheard of before 2001, have become a regular occurrence in Kabul. Attacks seem to be completely random and often it is just civilians who perish.

Despite this terrible fear and violence that people experience on a daily basis, there is an even greater worry that preoccupies Afghans now. Many believe that the departure of Isaf troops will prompt another bloody civil war. No one is certain of his or her fate after 2014. Talking to Kabulis about the exit of international troops reminded me more of doomsday prophecies you might read about in cult literature than anything else. Even the children at Skateistan were talking about it. When I interviewed Madina, Khorshid's friend, about her life and her future, she talked about her hope for a peaceful Afghanistan where she could go to school and pursue skateboarding.

What became clear to me from my interactions there and with other ordinary Afghans is that there is no ideology or group that Afghans feel so strongly about as to warrant them to fight. In fact, many feel that there isn't a single party that represents them or caters for their everyday needs. There is a profound sense of fatigue that comes from being in the middle of powerful forces that they can't control.

After three decades of war the Afghan people I spoke to want peace. For this to happen, it is imperative that 2014 does not bring another gory conflict to Afghanistan. But it seems the British government is in danger of limiting its exit strategy to a public relations campaign. If there is going to be peace and stability in Afghanistan, the British and the US administrations must work to create a clear and robust framework for exiting Afghanistan. This must include a viable strategy for negotiating with the Taliban and clear terms for power sharing after the troops leave.

Afghanistan needs a credible plan for how to continue reconstruction and the building of its economy; and it must include a plan B: what would happen if parties didn't keep to their end of the bargain. If Afghanistan is left without a realistic plan for peace, it will further jeopardise an already unstable region, threaten our own security and more children like Khorshid will die in brutal and pointless acts of violence.