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The Macleans.ca Interview: Fatima Gailani

The head of Afghanistan's Red Crescent Society says Canadian soldiers should stay in Afghanistan—and stick to soldiering

Paul Wells | May 20, 2008 | 4:37 pm EST

Fatima Gailani has been the president of the Afghan Red Crescent Society since 2004. Her father Pir Sayed Ahmed Gailani led the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan, one of the main mujahedeen organizations that resisted the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. After her return to Afghanistan from exile in London, she was a delegate to the Afghan Loya Jirga, which helped write a new constitution for the country. Ms. Gailani spoke to *Macleans'* senior columnist Paul Wells last week in Ottawa.

Q: *I was in Afghanistan for a week in October and many people there talked of the difficulty of coordinating military and NGO efforts, the fact that many of the NGOs don't talk to soldiers for reasons of neutrality, and that coordination is a huge problem. Do you share that perception? Is it getting better or worse?*

A: Well, whether it is easy or difficult for NGOs to cooperate or coordinate with the soldiers is one thing. But the job of a national society (like the Red Cross or Red Crescent) in a country, especially a country with conflicts, is a unique role. It has to be 100 per cent neutral. It has to be 100 per cent trusted by the insurgency to allow our more than 40,000 volunteers to operate in different areas. The access the Afghan Red Crescent Society has is unique. They play a role that no one else could take over because they come from the community; they know the problems of the community, they are known and trusted by the community—both sides. So it is easier to work

through them, and also we must not jeopardize their lives and their safety by doing and acting in a way which is not the job of a national society.

Q: *What sort of projects are those volunteers working on?*

A: Usually it is natural disasters, not-so-natural disasters—armed conflicts—first aid, disaster preparedness, mine awareness, and often there is an important role if there are epidemics. They are playing lots of roles so it's important to train them better and give them more facilities.

Q: *What's the public health situation in Afghanistan these days?*

A: In a country after 24 years of war and still in armed conflict, you cannot expect that all of a sudden the health system will revive. It's a poor country; it's always been a poor country. Most of the health system is a free health system. So it needs lots of money, lots of resources to revive it. It's much better than it used to be, but it's a long way to go to call it adequate.

Q: *And the main challenges, are they epidemic, viral, nutrition...?*

A: Mother and child. [Death in childbirth is] definitely the No. 1 problem we have in Afghanistan. Because there are no maternity wards, because the mothers are young, and because of complications, which are nothing in a country like yours, but in a country like Afghanistan could kill the child and especially the mother. I mean, a breech child, you see it with ultrasound and you take measures to prepare for it. But in Afghanistan often only after both are dead do you know what the cause of death was. And even if they miraculously survive, you have hemorrhages and many, many other problems. Although the situation for mother and child has improved dramatically in the last two, three years, it is one of the worst in the world.

Q: *Do you have any general observations about Canadian-delivered development assistance in Afghanistan? Does Canada have a reputation, for good or ill?*

A: Canada has a very good reputation. Afghanistan is a country which is hurt so badly during 24 years of war. We had an invasion by a superpower. We had civil wars. We became a tool in a regional battle. Every kind of war was fought at the expense of the people of Afghanistan. So they are very sensitive about everything. They know that when the Canadian government does something, it is with the money that people have paid. Taxpayer money. It makes them happy, it gives them hope. And then to see the practical help which comes, whether it is to a hospital, clinics, whether it is training, scholarships or education in general, they feel it and it gives them hope.

Q: *There's also a substantial military component to Canadian involvement. Does it help or hinder your work?*

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