

International Women's Day

Overview: Women's Day ceremony

Date/Time: 081030MAR11

Location: Khaliqi Hotel, Meymaneh, Faryab

Composed by: Samantha Bruzan, Human Terrain Analyst

Summary:

HTT was accompanied by an interpreter, LT Schiller, and SSGT Thomas of the 1-84 FET. We arrived at 1030, half an hour after the start of the ceremony. About 200 women were in attendance of which about 20 were wearing burkas during the entire ceremony. Sixty males also attended. ACTED, the French NGO who works throughout Afghanistan was the main contributor.

The Master of Ceremony was a female student from Setara High School, a girls' school that HTT has already visited. The media included Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA) along with three other media representatives. The ceremony was held on the second floor of the Khaliqi Hotel, located in front of Meymaneh Park. The hotel has clearly seen better days with its chipped orange paint on the walls, and windows broken in many places. Desk fans hung on every column around the walls of the room. The sign on the stage read "Economic and social development cannot be achieved without women"

The Director of Women's Affairs appreciated our presence. We were even called up to receive gifts (fabric for an Afghan dress) during the gift ceremony.

The Director of Women's Affairs, Sharifa Azimi was giving a speech when we entered, so we were not able to hear what was said by her. The provincial governor spoke after her, and talked about the role and history of women.

The female Attorney for the Provincial Shura spoke next, but the ladies in our vicinity had mentioned she was "speaking like a three year old". The perception of this woman was very negative. At one point she visibly messed up part of the speech, and loud cross-talk started happening around the room¹.

The next speaker was a woman who works as a civil rights worker who discussed divorce, a relatively rare occurrence in the province with only 3-5 women seeking divorces each year. Abdul Ghani Nasrat, the Director of the Provincial Shura, spoke about the renaming of a park in Meymaneh; it will not be called Faryab Women's Garden".

When Malawi Jamalee, a religious elder respected for his knowledge of Islam, came to the front everyone listened attentively. He discussed the Prophet's support for women and described the proper relationship between husband and wife as one of friendship built on mutual respect:

"And god said women are the best in the world, and men should respect them. You can't hurt or be mean to animals, so why would you be mean to your wife?"

Then he followed up with "Now, I am not telling you to go hit your husband. We need to learn how to solve problems between husband and wife." This positive message about women ended, however, when the Malawi stipulated what prohibitions husbands should enforce. (Analyst comment: Jamalee first directed his speech to the women in the crowd and then the men. There were at least sixty males present, including the security detail.) Some examples include: women

should not be on TV, should not go to or work in hotels, should not go to restaurants, should not wear men's clothes, or should not work outside the home "Too much freedom is not good," he cautioned. When divorce does happen, he advised that children should stay with their mothers and alimony paid by the husband to help support them. The Malawi's message was mixed. On the one hand, he voiced his respect for women: "1000 years ago women did not have any respect. When they had a baby girl, they were upset. But God said having a women in the home is good" On the other hand, he added the caveat that women are of value as long as they don't work and wear clothes that resemble the dress of men. The Malawi then added that women should be covered, and more religious schools should be opened.

Other speakers included a woman who spoke in Uzbeki. Said Mobashir, the Hajj organizer, spoke about the history of women, The next speaker, Farida Taked spoke about the history of women, and an NDS representative who, on behalf of the NDS Commander, wished everyone a Happy Women's Day was the last to speak.

When everyone was preparing to leave, almost all of the women donned burkas before stepping outside.

Analyst Comment:

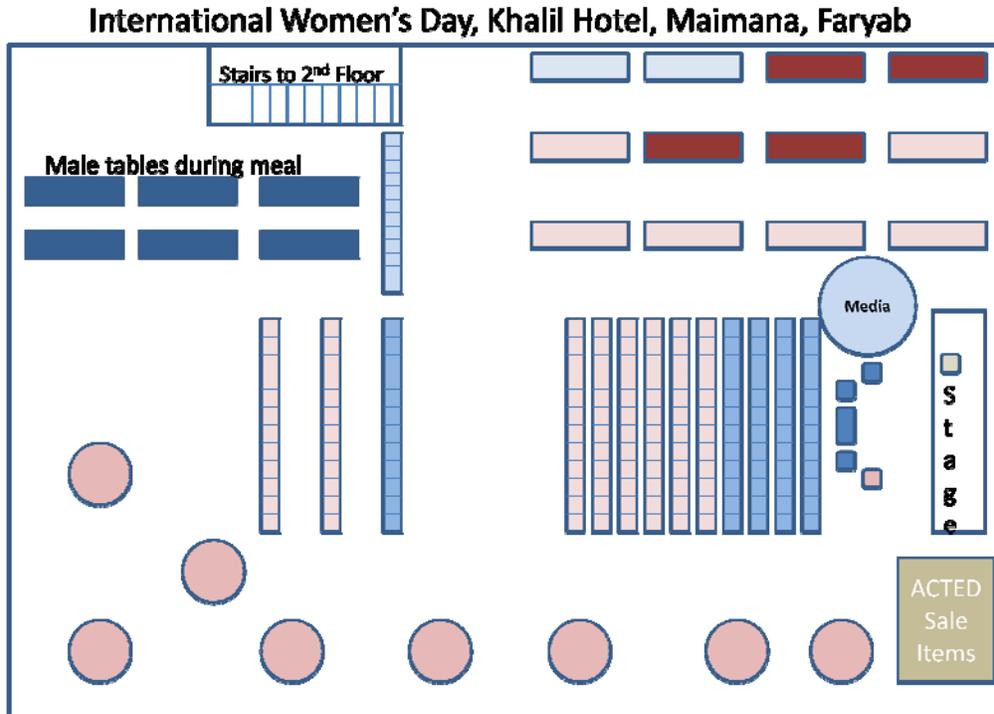
The main theme of the ceremony/conference was literacy and domestic violence and the past history of women. Many of the presenters, particularly the men, spoke mainly about the history of women instead of improvements that could be made to the lives of women today.

The atmosphere was calm and formal until after the meal when those gathered perused the ACTED sale items before leaving. Throughout the speeches, the audience either listened, answered the cell phones or cross-talked to others around them.

In total, there were ten speakers: five females and five males. The male speakers not only spoke for a longer amount of time each, but they were seemingly chosen for their importance and speaking ability. In general, the females lacked the same level of comfort when cast in the public eye.

The seating arrangement of the women and men was very interesting. The men occupied the first four rows and the couches in the front of the room closest to the stage. (See figure 1 below) The women sat in the rows behind them and at the tables on the sides. In the furthest tables to the rear sat burka-clad women as if segregated to their own area on the margins. The women who removed their burkas were dressed very well.

The men were the organizers, the security and the main spokesmen for this celebration of women. They were also the first served when lunch was brought out. When lunch was served, men moved to tables in the back, and women ate lunch everywhere else, with no further interaction. On the surface, this Women's Day s seemed a little like a campaign rally for the provincial governor and the event's host, the NGO ACTED.



[Pink: Location of Women] [Blue: Men] [Dark Pink: Women in Burkas] [Light Blue: ANP/Media]

Figure 1



AUP escort and trucks behind the hotel. Most were gone when we left, possibly showing their responsibility to the governor and not necessarily the security of the event.



Provincial Governor Shafiq on stage. The first four rows in front of the stage were men.



The ACTED table with goods for sale. The goods were purchased from local artisans and sold by ACTED.



The media and the influential figures who were present, handing out some awards. The woman in white is Sharifa, the Director of Women's affairs, who was influential in organizing this event.