

The lioness of Afghanistan

One American woman's personal battle to turn back the tide on the Taliban

By GENEVIEVE LONG
Epoch Times Staff

Sonia Nassery Cole commands a room no matter what the size, and it's for a good cause.

Cole, who has both Afghan and American citizenship, is founder and CEO of the Afghanistan World Foundation (AWF). The non-profit organization works to assist the humanitarian needs of Afghans and to rebuild their country. AWF was founded in the wake of 9/11 in 2002, but its roots go back to the 1980s when Cole became a vocal advocate for her home country. She started by writing a letter to then-President Ronald Reagan to ask for his help.

"I never dreamed that he would answer my letter," says Ms. Cole, recalling her first step into what has become a lifetime of advocating on behalf of those who have no voice.

But Reagan did respond, and invited the young refugee to the White House. She organized congressional testimony to arm legendary Afghan rebel commander Ahmad Massoud and his Northern Alliance Freedom Fighters. Massoud, who was later assassinated, was nicknamed the lion of Afghanistan. He called Cole his "lioness" for her work and spirit on behalf of their country. It's a nickname she has lived up to, and then some.

Cole is as unfailingly polite as she is incomparably passionate about rebuilding Afghanistan from decades of war and the poison grip of the Taliban. And she knows how to be genuinely charming when describing deadly serious situations.

Case in point was a recent screening and presentation in New York City of a documentary she produced about an 8-year-old Afghan boy who is the sole income-earner in his family, called The Bread Winner. Cole surprised the audience by stepping out from behind the podium to give a heartfelt explanation of the story behind the making of the documentary.

But if Ms. Cole has mastered the art of charming an audience, she also knows how to keep the focus on the urgent situation in Afghanistan.

"The country is falling apart because of the Taliban," said Ms. Cole during the presentation.

Rebuilding, again

Anyone who mistakes Cole as just another pretty face is in for a shock. It'd be more accurate to compare her to a bulldozer with her sights set on literally digging out the earth from underneath the



FOCUSED: Sonia Nassery Cole visits the Children's Hospital in Kabul, Afghanistan. IQBALAHMAD

feet of the Taliban.

Well before 9/11, she raised millions of dollars for Afghan refugees after the end of the Soviet occupation there. But it's since the fall of the Taliban in late 2001 that she has found her stride. In 2002, she visited Afghanistan and saw Pakistani and Afghan refugees living in tents in the bitter cold of winter. Some might have seen only a humanitarian crisis. Cole saw a breeding ground for easy targets when Taliban recruiters came calling.

"When you see a life lived under a tent—it's so cold in the winter and so hot in the summer—you see how easy it is to take a kid to fight for the Taliban," says Ms. Cole. "He has [nothing but] a cloth over his head."

Seven years later, proper housing for Afghans is one of AWF's primary missions. Along with renowned architect Robert Mechelsens, Cole has conceived of a housing project that will maintain the regional aesthetic quality of Afghan housing. The homes will also be able to withstand earthquakes and bullets and have a car-

bon-neutral footprint. The project will use recycled shipping containers covered in mud and placed in groups to form traditional housing compounds. Local materials and labor will be used, and AWF hopes to have a prototype ready by this autumn.

Roots forged in fire

Cole has been living in the United States since she escaped from her home country when Russian forces invaded in 1979. The story behind her escape remains a mystery, although a recent Wall Street Journal article asserted that she left at the age of 14 on foot, helped by her father's friend. But the Journal's account is wrong. Cole has never gone on the record about how she really escaped.

"It was one of those things that was so painful," says Ms. Cole about her escape. "When people asked how I got out, it was too much to explain the real story—I was young, and so I just created a version."

This duality of conflict and peace that Cole has lived through

is part of her mystique. But it is also a source of strength.

The coming year is going to be one of new beginnings for her, including setting the record straight about her escape in her upcoming biography. She's also in the midst of financing a movie she wrote called The Black Tulip about a family resisting the evils of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

One of the most distinct characteristics of Cole's approach to helping Afghanistan is her absolute refusal to kowtow to the Taliban. Case in point, she is planning on filming at least part of her movie in Kabul.

"People don't realize there's an entire movie industry there," says Ms. Cole excitedly when talking about filming her movie. She's not only excited about the prospect of filming a major motion picture in Afghanistan, she hopes her work will inspire others to work there. But she never takes her eyes off of the ultimate prize.

"My whole goal in Afghanistan is to get rid of the Taliban," says Ms. Cole.

Media silenced over Chinese officials' rape case

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Deng's grandfather, a retired judge, told Beijing lawyer Xu Zhiyong that Deng was indeed raped and had acted bravely in self defense.

The police have tried to deny a rape had occurred. The Badong Public Security office had announced that Deng had just been pushed over or pressed down. According to reports from Nanfang Daily and Guangzhou Daily, however, Deng wasn't just pushed over or pressed down.

Deng told the two attorneys representing her, Xia Lin and Xia Nanhui, that she was sexually assaulted. After leaving the detention center where Deng is currently being held, the lawyers described the case as cold-blooded. "She provided me details of the assault and the evidence is enough to convict the officials of rape."

According to her lawyer, the police made substantial mistakes in collecting evidence. The police left important evidence, the underwear Deng wore on that day, to her mother. Nanfang Daily quoted Deng's lawyer as saying, "The police did not collect evidence until May 22, 11 days after the incident. On May 22, the police sealed Deng's underwear as evidence after Deng's mother had washed all of Deng's clothes from that day except her bra. The day her mother washed her clothes, May 21, was also the day Deng's lawyer first met with her."



Deng Yujiao. INTERNET

All key evidence was most likely destroyed."

According to the media report, before Deng's mother washed her clothes on May 21, she received a phone call from Director Tan Jing from Yesangan Police Station and met with him.

On May 23, the Badong County Press Office released a statement saying that Deng wasn't raped and Deng's mother Zhang Shuhai was no longer employing Deng's lawyers.

New Yorkers enjoy new Broadway pedestrian malls

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When asked why she chose the busy area over the park, Annam said "you're sitting in the middle of the street." Pausing for a moment, she continued, "It's cool."

Her comment appeared to be the general consensus.

Rana Usman was enjoying his day off from working at the NYPD. He said he had been sitting there for nearly four hours, just enjoying the day. "It's fantastic, beautiful," Usman said. "It's better than a movie."

Similar changes were also made

at Herald Square, where Broadway was closed to vehicle traffic between 33rd Street and 35th Street. The newly made pedestrian malls will eventually receive benches, café tables, and a more park-like feel.

As Broadway is the only major road that bisects the grid layout of Midtown, the change is hoped to reduce traffic. Vehicles travelling east-west will not be affected. If the change is seen to be effective by the end of the year, a more permanent setup will be made for the new pedestrian plazas.

What could possibly go wrong?

NANTES, France (Reuters)—Close to 200 prisoners will cycle around France next month, watched by scores of guards on bicycles, in the first penal version of the Tour de France, authorities said Monday.

The 196 prisoners will cycle in a pack and breakaway sprints will not be allowed. They will be accompanied by 124 guards and prison sports instructors. There will be no ranking, the idea being to foster values like teamwork and effort.

"It's a kind of escape for us, a chance to break away from the daily reality of prison," said Daniel, a 48-year-old prisoner in the western city of Nantes, at the official launch of the event. His last name was not given.

"If we behave well, we might be able to get released earlier, on probation," he told reporters.

The prisoners' Tour de France will take them 2,300 km (1,400 miles) around the country, starting in the northern city of Lille on June 4 and stopping in 17 towns, each of which has a prison. However, participants will sleep in hotels.

The finish line will be in Paris, following Tour de France tradition.

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"This project aims to help these men reintegrate into society by fostering values like effort, teamwork and self-esteem," said Sylvie Marion of the prison authorities.

"We want to show them that with some training, you can achieve your goals and start a new life," she said.



Racers compete in the 2007 Tour de France. A new program in France could set 200 prisoners on their own version of the race.

PASCAL PAVANI/AFP/GETTY IMAGE

Two hundred French, Flemish couples re-marry for solidarity

By FILIP DELANOV
Epoch Times Staff

BRUSSELS—Belgium is a divided country. In the northern Flemish region, people speak Dutch and in the south, French is spoken.

On the afternoon of May 23, two hundred couples from both sides took part in a symbolic re-marriage at the Grand Market in Brussels. According to news

reports, this was their way of showing solidarity between the Flemish and the French regions of Belgium.

The couples, in which one partner speaks Dutch and the other one speaks French, refuse to pay attention to the continuous social and economic disputes between the two regions of Belgium. They said they don't have any language problems with each other and their children are perfectly edu-

cated in the two languages.

It was a lighthearted event organized by the group Save the Solidarity. They want to show that local people from Flanders and Wallonia have had enough of the negative political discussions in Brussels, and said they don't want a "separation" of the northern and the southern parts.

The specter of partition has loomed over Belgium for years, and political analysts warn that

the country could easily split into Flanders and Wallonia—separate French and Flemish speaking lands.

Save the Solidarity wants to show unity between the Flemish and French parts of Belgium in order to maintain the federal social security safety net.

In a simple ceremony, the couples were re-married by the Mayor of Brussels, Freddy Thielemans.

Malaysia: Former communist leader refused repatriation

By JAMES CHOW
Epoch Times Staff

KUALA LUMPUR—Malaysia's Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Razak, confirmed in a press conference on Wednesday, May 27, that he would not allow the exiled leader of the Malaysian Communist Party (MCP), Chin Peng, to return to the country.

"The return of the former terrorist will only bring dissatisfaction, especially to the security force and the families of those who had died during the Emergency from 1948 to 1961," said Najib in the televised press conference at his office.

The Malayan Emergency was Britain's term for the bloody and expensive 12-year war against the communists. Britain granted Malaysia independence in 1957, but a protracted communist insurgency resumed in 1967 and lasted another two decades.

On May 25, Information, Communications, Culture and Arts Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim, slammed political leaders and others who were trying to raise positive sentiments for Chin Peng and communism.

"Chin Peng and his communist troops, who had killed thousands of people in the past, certainly do not deserve any consideration from us," said Rais, highlighting that over 50,000 soldiers died fighting the communists.

The Minister also strongly criticized several websites and blogs that expressed sympathy for Chin Peng, and idealized the Communist Party and communism.

Rais said he'd raise the topic in cabinet and promised to take action against blogs that promoted communism. He reminded Malaysians that it would be a disaster if com-



NO COMMUNISTS--Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim, Malay Information, Communications, Culture and Arts Minister says it would be a disaster if communism returned to Malaysia. SHAUN CURRY/AFP/GETTY

munist returned to their country. The Minister's comments have started a heated debate on some of Malaysia's top blogs and news sites.

The issue of Chin Peng's return came into the spotlight when the Supreme Court of Malaysia upheld a lower court decision on April 30 refusing the repatriation of the 84-year-old former guerrilla. Chin fled to China in 1960. He lived for some three decades before moving to southern Thailand where he resides now.

Chairman of the Penang branch of the People's Movement Party, Datuk Dr Teng Hock Nan, has argued that Chin no longer poses a security threat to the country and should be allowed to return home. Citizens International, a Malaysian non-governmental organization, has also requested that the government allow Chin to return.