

# Afghanistan Human Rights Head Visits Melbourne

*Dr Sima Samar Talks About her Role in Rebuilding Afghanistan*

By Erica Contini

In the aftermath of the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, there was much publicity about the plight of women in that country. The news has been far less frequent in recent years, but the plight of most women remains perilous.

Into this news void stepped Dr Sima Samar, the chairperson of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission and its first Minister for Women, to address the issue at a Castan Centre event in Melbourne. Dr Samar, who is also United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Sudan, visited Australia as a guest of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Dr Samar was the first woman from the minority Hazara ethnic group to obtain a medical degree in Afghanistan, but she was forced to flee to Pakistan with her son in 1984 when the government arrested her husband, who was never seen again. Over the next decade, Dr Samar established the Shuhada Organisation in Pakistan which was dedicated to providing health care and education to Afghan women and providing training to medical staff. In 2002, after the fall of the Taliban, Dr Samar returned to Afghanistan where she headed the Women's Ministry until she was forced to resign when threatened with death and harassed for questioning conservative Islamic laws. She was then appointed as the Chairperson of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, which was created by the Afghan Constitution to monitor, promote and advance human rights.

During her speech, Dr Samar assured the audience that, while the situation is tenuous, the outlook is not necessarily bleak and Afghanistan will continue to make progress in creating a culture which values the human rights of all people.

Dr Samar spoke about the activities of the AIHRC and the difficulties it has faced in implementing its mandate. When Dr Samar took on the role of commissioner of the AIHRC, the first issue that had to be addressed was creating a culture which embraced human rights—prior to the new con-

stitution, even the utterance of the phrase 'human rights' was a criminal offence. Rather than borrow an approach used by another country, she wanted to create an approach which was suited specifically for Afghanistan.

Dr Samar started by making people aware of human rights and the equality of all peoples. The AIHRC worked in conjunction with the ministry of education to implement a new curriculum which instilled the values of human rights into everyday teachings. For this strategy to work, the AIHRC also had to promote the value of education as a basic human right which was accessible to all individuals, including girls.

While it was important to change the social culture through education, it was also important to integrate human rights into the political structures. One major project involved the training of police and other law enforcement officers on the prohibition of the use of torture, even for police interrogations and national security situations.

Another concern of the AIHRC is transitional justice. An independent study of Afghan citizens found that they wanted to see crimes properly punished, rather than a truth and reconciliation process. Dr Samar noted that peace will not be sustainable without justice.

While the country has come a long way since the fall of the Taliban, Dr Samar noted that security is getting worse and the rule of law is weak. She stressed the need for continued international support of Afghanistan to combat the power of the warlords and to stop the oppression of women.

Dr Samar's outspoken enthusiasm for the progress the country is making brings cause for optimism about the country's future. Social change does not occur overnight, but through gradual social transformation. Dr Samar is exactly the person the country needs in order to progress further and realise its goals as a new democracy.



*Dr Samar during her lecture*



*Afterwards, Dr Samar chats to an Afghan community member. She also spent an evening in Dandenong with the community.*