

## GOOD NEWS FROM AFGHANISTAN, JIM HOLMES, 15.4.21

We were given a real insight into village life in Afghanistan this month. Our news stories focus on the fighting which blights the major cities but for most the country offers a much more tranquil and simple lifestyle as their daily experience. Central Afghanistan at the onset of winter offers a stunning landscape as was revealed by our speaker, Jim Holmes, a professional photographer who has worked all over the world for a variety of aid organisations concerned with environmental and humanitarian projects.

As an introduction to the country, Jim showed us photographs of places he had visited. We saw a peaceful street in Kabul lined with a series of booksellers as the Afghans are avid readers, reminding us of the popular book portraying Afghan life, 'The Bookseller of Kabul'. Jim's journey had also included a visit to central Afghanistan to see the niches of the huge Bamiyan Buddhas, once carved into the soft rock of a hillside but destroyed by the zealously Islamic Taliban in 2001. Other features of this intriguing country which were portrayed by superb photographs were the stunning light of a desert landscape in winter sunshine, and the houses made in hillside caves. Farming is mostly small-scale with families rearing their own sheep or trying to grow crops on small patches of land with just three rainy months a year, although we were surprised to learn that large crops of apricots and of pomegranates are also produced in the more fertile valleys of Afghanistan. Saffron is grown, too, as well as both opium and cannabis.



In Afghanistan Jim Holmes followed rural solar engineers as they supplied sustainable power systems to remote, peaceful Hazara villages. With no mains power but plenty of sun in this mountainous desert landscape, solar power offers an opportunity for small-scale industry and easier communications. Jim Holmes' talk showed local specialists, dubbed 'barefoot engineers', training the villagers to manage their own power sources by installing solar panels. The difference it might make to their lives could be quite significant and occasionally villagers have even been able to run a television. The presentation gave us a sympathetic understanding of both the simple pleasures and real difficulties of living in such a mountainous country as the winter snows began. The photographs captured much of the emotion, joy and friendships of Afghan communities



where our speaker was warmly received and treated to shared meals with delicious home-baked bread and home grown food, albeit with everyone sitting cross-legged on the floor. Afghanistan is a country of variety and of surprises: not only are girls given a secondary education, at least in some areas, they are sometimes even taught to play football, perhaps a revelation in a predominantly Muslim country.

Altogether, it was a most enlightening presentation and the discussion it generated revealed the knowledge and pleasure the participants of the meeting had gained. Many thanks, once again, to Andrea Willett for managing the various complexities of Zoom hosting.