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CHRONIQUE

Interview

« In Afghanistan, it's very difficult to photograph women »

Focus

**Eyewitness :
A french doctor held
hostage**

Report

1980-2020 : 40 years in Afghanistan

Humanitarian information from



**PREMIERE
URGENCE
INTERNATIONALE**



A world where a cup of tea is unusual

Last January, I went with Olivier Routeau, Première Urgence Internationale's Director of Operations, to visit our teams in Nangarhar province. We had the chance to meet several people at one of our mobile clinic sites, about twenty kilometres from Jalalabad. Security concerns dictated the pace of our visit, which led to our trip being too short for our liking. Obviously. But above all, and most frustratingly as far as I was concerned, these same worries forced us to refuse an offer to share a cup of tea with the village Elders.

What is this world where conditions and external pressures make such a simple exchange impossible?

This is the world of the populations we support, a world of immense danger and constant health and food insecurity. A world where **out of every 10 people, 4 are in urgent need of assistance, 8 have never known peace, and 10 are immediate casualties of war.**

This has been the world of the Afghan people for **40 years**. Over the past four decades, the country has experienced a succession of crises, which has never allowed for any lasting re-establishment of conditions conducive to a safe and peaceful life. The Afghan people also have to cope with challenging periods of drought, flooding, and earthquakes, which hit them all the harder because of the lack of effective infrastructure. This is a world whose high birth rate (4.63 children per woman) is matched by a record infant mortality rate (73/1000). A world where only the over-45s can remember an Afghanistan without turmoil or war; a world where the school enrolment rate (41% of the population is under 14) has been among the lowest in the world for decades.

This world is also the world of our employees, local and expatriate, who have been relentlessly following each other into the places where no one goes since 1980. **In Afghanistan, humanitarians work in constant fear for their safety:** simple or more complex attacks, kidnapping, detentions and torture are tangible threats. These fears are proved justified from time to time, as shown by Philippe Augoyard's experiences in 1983, or the mission in 2019 where one of our mobile clinics was attacked, seriously injuring the staff and causing the death of the driver. However, over the decades, Aide Médicale Internationale—which became Première Urgence Internationale in 2011—has been able to establish and constantly improve on its security procedures in order to carry out its activities. The mission's long standing has been a decisive factor in both how well-accepted our association is in the field and in our being able to accumulate so much experience. From the beginning, **the commitment and dedication of our Afghan and expatriate staff** has led to the contribution of valuable skills and expertise to implement the association's mandate in areas devoid of any health infrastructure.

Paradoxically, although our mission is the most operationally efficient it has ever been, and although the level of need is growing on an unprecedented scale, interest from the international community, as well as funding, is slowing down. **Since 2018, the number of people in need has doubled (at least) each year.** The most pressing issue is health needs, especially during this pandemic period, but it is not the only need: food insecurity, access to psychological support, and emergency response to displaced populations are all daily challenges. More than ever, Première Urgence Internationale remains committed to the Afghan people, and we remain as determined as ever to serve the weakest populations in the poorest areas.

This issue of La Chronique reviews Première Urgence Internationale's activities and its dynamism in developing relevant responses to the challenges of this world where being free to share a cup of tea remains an exception to the norm.

Philippe Jouannet,

Vice-president of the Board of Directors, Première Urgence Internationale

1980-2020 : 40 YEARS IN AFGHANISTAN

The French humanitarian sector has close links to Afghanistan. This is the crisis for which several large French NGOs were created at the dawn of the 1980s. This includes Première Urgence Internationale, whose first missions were carried out on Afghan soil, at that time under the name of Aide International Médicale. Since then, **40 years have passed: 40 years of conflict, crisis, and tragedy for civilians.** In 2020 more than ever, humanitarian intervention remains essential in this country.

In 1979, the eyes of the world turn to Afghanistan. The country is plunged into war, with Soviet involvement. The consequences for civilians are tragic. For the majority of the Afghan population and the Mujahedin, the only assistance comes from international humanitarian organizations. In Paris, a small group of doctors and nurses organise, founding the charity Aide Médicale Internationale (AMI) and sending medical teams to Afghanistan. Afterwards, the NGO launches other projects around the world, but this intervention in Afghanistan remains at the heart of its mandate, and initially represented 30% of its budget and resources.

A strong medical mandate

Since these first French doctors set off, and throughout the 40 years since, Aide Médicale Internationale—which became Première Urgence Internationale in 2011—has worked ceaselessly with the Afghan people to respond to emergencies and contribute to an improvement of the country's health system. Over the years and decades, the field of action has continually evolved, but **our goal has remained the same:** to improve the living conditions of civilians, and to facilitate access to primary health care. Our missions have always been characterized by a strong medical mandate.

Over the years, Première Urgence Internationale has committed to **strengthening healthcare infrastructure**, from small local health posts to large provincial hospitals, including the use of the mobile clinics that crisscross the villages in remote areas. In recent years, the NGO's teams have also grown to include experts in **psychological support** for these populations affected by long decades of war.

Nutrition programs (food aid) and emergency response mechanisms after natural disasters (drought, floods, etc.) complete the range of services the NGO offers.

A succession of wars, catastrophes and epidemics

For four decades, chronic and urgent needs have never disappeared, regardless of the changing political context. The Soviet occupation in the 1980s, the rise of the Taliban and the civil war in the 1990s, and then the war on terrorism from 2001 onwards have **kept the civilian population in constant danger**. At the same time, the country, prone to natural disasters, is regularly subject to drought, floods, extremely harsh winters, and earthquakes. Having so many **environmental issues** all leads to population displacement and worsen humanitarian needs.

In recent months, **the COVID-19 pandemic** has also hit the country hard, a new and additional scourge on civilians. Première Urgence Internationale has deployed an emergency humanitarian response with dedicated resources. We have adapted our usual programs to help slow the pandemic in Afghanistan, as we have in all the other areas where we are involved. Supplies of medical equipment have also been provided, thanks to a humanitarian air bridge linking France with Afghanistan. But this deadly new virus has only worsened the humanitarian and healthcare crisis and increased the need for assistance. The humanitarian response plan now estimates the total number of people in need at **14 million, or 38% of the total population**; a considerable increase compared with 9.4 million in early 2020 (before the pandemic) and 6.3 million in 2019. Possible future scenarios do not look promising. The electoral process in the



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country makes a substantial peace agreement impossible. In the years to come, international funding is expected to continue to decline. But the needs will remain pressing.

Shining a light on a forgotten crisis

Today, Afghanistan remains one of the most complex crisis zones in the world. **The year 2020 marks 40 years of Première Urgence Internationale presence in Afghanistan**. A sad anniversary, which has given us an opportunity to shine a light on this forgotten humanitarian crisis and the conditions in which Afghan civilians live today.

The NGO has organised a photographic retrospective with the title «**40 years of help**».

4 DECADES OF ADAPTATION

1979 : Creation of the NGO Aide Médicale Internationale (AMI).

1980 : AMI's first missions in Afghanistan. Intervention is risky and the terrain difficult to access. The teams arrive via Pakistan and rely on local guides to cross the front and reach isolated villages.

1983: One of the doctors, Philippe Augoyard, is captured by Soviet-Afghan forces and held hostage for five months (read more in the focus article opposite).

1987 : AMI opens a training hospital to educate Afghan medical students.

1992: Afghan Mujaheddin overthrow the communist regime. A civil war breaks out.

1994: AMI launches its professional magazine Salamati, which is distributed to doctors, nurses and pharmacists in Afghan health centres.

1998: The Taliban drives international NGOs out of Kabul. Humanitarian missions continue, despite the risk of attacks and uncertainty around international funding.

2001: On 11th September, the USA is the victim of terrorist attacks. The Al-Qaida network takes responsibility. The American government declares a war on terrorism, with a particular focus in Afghanistan, and deploys armed forces to the country.

1980 – 1990 :
THE FORBIDDEN COUNTRY

1990 – 2001 :
DURING THE TALIBAN REGIME

which tells the story of its four decades of intervention in the country. A selection of archival photos sits alongside a recent photo series, taken by Afghan photographer Roya Heydari at the end of 2019, to show our current activities (read our interview with her opposite). The exhibition opened in Kabul in January 2020 at the French Institute of Afghanistan, with partners, journalists and political decision-makers all present. This moment also provided an opportunity to honour and thank several of our Afghan employees, who have been involved with the mission for twenty years or more.



A sad anniversary, which has given us an opportunity to shine a light on this forgotten humanitarian crisis >>

"Thank you to our mission teams. To all our teams: those of yesterday, those of today. To all the experiences we have had, and to the many former colleagues among us this evening. We are a big and beautiful family!", said Olivier Routeau, the Director of Operations, in recognition

of those present. French Ambassador David Martinon also wished to pay tribute: "To my French compatriots who have been involved with the Afghan people for so many years, and who continue to be to this day.



These 40 years underline the experience and trust you have built, mission after mission. It seems to me today that this bond of trust is only getting stronger, proof of your effectiveness and the importance of your actions." The exhibition will also be showing in Paris from October 1st to 13th, 2020, in the Polka photo gallery (in the Marais district). All readers, donors and supporters curious about Première Urgence Internationale's activities are invited.

2003 : AMI becomes a key agent in the national healthcare system and develops an innovative project in collaboration with the Afghan Ministry of Health in six of the country's provinces.
2007: The Afghan government launches its own professional magazine aimed at the country's medical personnel, Roghtia, directly inspired by AMI's Salamati.

2011: Aide Médicale Internationale becomes Première Urgence Internationale.

2014: The biggest French NGOs get together to organise an event in Paris called Don't Forget Afghanistan, a weeklong exhibition in homage to the country.

2016: Première Urgence Internationale launches a Facebook page dedicated to its Afghanistan mission.

2019-2020

2019-2020: Première Urgence Internationale undertakes an appraisal of its intervention in Afghanistan to mark 40 years of involvement in the country. A photographic retrospective is shown in Kabul (January 2020) and in Paris (October 2020).

... AND AFTER ?

2002 – 2010 :
DEVELOPING HEALTHCARE INTERVENTION

2010 – 2019 :
DON'T FORGET AFGHANISTAN

EYEWITNESS :

A FRENCH DOCTOR HELD HOSTAGE

In 1983, French doctor Philippe Augoyard set off on a humanitarian mission to Afghanistan with **Première Urgence Internationale** (Aide Médicale Internationale at the time). One morning, during a raid by the Soviet-Afghan army, he was captured and taken prisoner. He was to remain hostage for five months in the prisons of Kabul, with no news from outside. His testimony sheds light on a risk-filled time right at the heart of the Afghan conflict.

Driven by his humanitarian vocation, in the early 1980s Philippe Augoyard decided to interrupt his internship at Rouen hospital to go on a mission in Afghanistan. Despite the risks he would face in the country, he wanted to help provide care to Afghan civilians affected by this major crisis. The country, under Soviet occupation, suffered from various internal conflicts and civilians were the first victims. Families lived under daily bombardment. Those who could afford to left the country to take refuge in Iran or Pakistan—including many doctors.

« The population was deprived of care. There was not much access to health care before, but the war created additional difficulties. War-wounded, no hospitals to take care of them, areas too remote to evacuate the wounded... There was a real need to send doctors.»

Escaping bombardment

He carried out his first mission in 1982, in tandem with a female doctor. The duo of French doctors travelled the provinces of Logar and Panjshir, going from village to village. They treated many anti-personnel mine injuries, burns, and wounds, and also provided moral support in the face of the psychological trauma these abandoned civilians had suffered.

In January 1983, after a short return to France, Philippe Augoyard left for his second mission, returning to the Logar, an area known for being the Mujaheddin base, and for its improvised civilian soldiers, opponents of the Soviet-Afghan communist regime. Two weeks after his arrival, **the area came under military attack**. The doctor, accompanied by a group of resistance fighters, fled into the mountains to escape the bombardments. The group crossed the mountains on foot, at night, in the icy cold of the Afghan winter. In the early hours of the morning, arriving in a village, they came across an army detachment unloading troops by helicopter. Philippe Augoyard took refuge in a mosque, where he stayed all day. In the evening, as he attempted to leave, **he was captured by Soviet troops**.

“It was the day after my capture and I had been able to sleep through the night in the military camp, and recover a little from the fatigue and worry of the preceding days. The craziest events had been piling up one on top of another into an absolute cavalcade of horrors, and I was just happy to be alive, not even hurt. «

The doctor, taken hostage, was brought to Kabul’s prison in a tank and handed over to the Afghan authorities. He remained locked up in Afghan jails for five months, including three months without any contact with France.

Imprisoned for the «offence of hope»

At the end of this rigged trial, Philippe Augoyard was sentenced to 30 years in prison. It came as a relief: it alleviated the threat of the death penalty, and brought hope of a reduction in sentencing. Especially **since his case was highly publicized in France**: public opinion mobilised, prompted by the memorable actions carried out by Aide Médicale Internationale and other NGOs including Médecins du Monde and Médecins sans Frontières. «Liberation committees» were organized in Paris and in the provinces, posters went up in the streets and metro stations, and a petition for the doctor’s release, publicised in the newspaper Libération, collected 700,000 signatures...



Philippe Augoyard subsequently received a pardon from the Afghan authorities, who sent him to India where he was entrusted to the French consulate. Back in France, the doctor toured the country to thank the support committees who mobilized for him, and to share his story. Two years after his release, he wrote a book about his experiences: «Imprisoned for the crime of hope».

“It’s my personal story, this nightmare, then the hope and the realisations that came from it”

Today, Philippe Augoyard is still a doctor. He works as a paediatrician in the south of France. At the same time, he is still involved in the humanitarian sector and is a member of the Board of Directors of Première Urgence Internationale.

«I don’t regret a single one of those events, of all the dreams and all the hopes that brought me here.»



INTERVIEW

« IN AFGHANISTAN, IT'S VERY DIFFICULT TO PHOTOGRAPH WOMAN »



Afghan photographer Roya Heydari has been documenting Première Urgence Internationale's current activities in Afghanistan. At the end of 2019, she spent two weeks with humanitarian teams in the country's eastern provinces, photographing the medical activities carried out by the NGO: mobile clinics, ambulances, support for local hospitals, training and awareness... She tells us about the project's highlights.

Why did you become a photographer?

For me, photography is a commitment. I made it my career in 2012. I originally wanted to study political science, but I quickly realized that **art could be even more powerful than politics**. Everything I heard about the country I grew up in was always negative and dark. I understood that photography was a great way to show a new image of Afghanistan and to influence attitudes, both inside and outside the country.

I do documentary photography above all else, because **I want to show the reality of everyday life**. I don't like posed, prepared photos. I want to show life in Afghanistan as it really is. I regularly post photos of my country on social media(1). Portraits, landscapes, moments in everyday life. I want people to see what life in Afghanistan is really like, that it's not just the tragedies they hear about in the media.

How did you photograph Première Urgence Internationale's work?

At the end of 2019, Première Urgence Internationale was looking for a photojournalist to document its activities in the east of the country, particularly its medical activities. I was invited to offer my services, and **I immediately wanted to be part of the adventure**. I was especially eager to go to the Nangarhar region: I had been there several times, but for short periods. I wanted to spend more time in this eastern province and see how I could represent it in photos.

I was curious, too, to understand exactly what type of programs Première Urgence Internationale is carrying out in Afghanistan. Until then, I had mostly seen images of their activities on the African continent, and **I was interested in helping them illustrate their work on Afghan soil**. All the more so knowing the history around their presence in the country!

« **I want to show the reality of everyday life in Afghanistan** »

Which photo are you most proud of?



The best photos are the ones where the subject plays along and lets you photograph them naturally, just as they are. The ones where the person being photographed is interested in the result, and lets you in on their daily life, so that you can take the best pictures.

In Afghanistan, it is very difficult to photograph women, for cultural reasons. **You really have to gain the family's trust, make them comfortable, reassure them**, before you can ask to photograph women. Once you make that connection, it becomes possible. But it takes time!

In Khas Kunar district, I met a woman who was curious about my work and let me photograph her from the front, without her veil. It took a while, but I finally had this great opportunity to take a portrait of an Afghan woman.

Roya Heydari has an Instagram account on which she regularly posts her photos : https://www.instagram.com/roya_heydari/

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QUESTIONS ?

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