

AFGHANISTAN: ASSISTANCE PROGRAMME

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Latest events

During the scheduled absence of the Federation's Head of Delegation in Afghanistan, the Delegation is being led by Ms Avice Warmington, Health Co-ordinator. Security in the capital, she reports, is unpredictable and a curfew is in operation from 21.00 hours. Until the situation becomes clearer, the Delegation is observing strict security measures. Staff are using clearly identified vehicles for all travel and remain in permanent radio contact with the Delegation Headquarters.

The Federation's offices have not been searched by Taliban forces and continue to be guarded by chowkidars (watchmen) employed by the Federation .

All female doctors, pharmacists and health educators are at work in the Federation-sponsored clinics in the city, but cleaning women employed by them have not been allowed to return. All three local female employees in the Delegation's office are also staying at home. Currently one bus picks up all Red Crescent/Federation employees for work and so far this has not presented a problem. However, according to one announcement, men and women may have to use separate buses in the future.

The issue of women's freedom to work under the new regime was discussed at a meeting on 3 October of all humanitarian agencies -- UN and NGOs -- working in Kabul. The session produced a statement that was presented to the ruling Shura, together with a request for a meeting between representatives of the agencies and the new authorities. The statement was also sent to the European Union, which met on Monday (7 October) in Brussels to discuss the issue of women's rights in Afghanistan.

Both Federation and ICRC Delegations were represented at the UN/NGO meeting. While contributing to the debate, they made clear the Movement's position -- that it would pursue the issues within the Movement and not through UN channels, in accordance with its Principle of independence.

The current attitude to women's activities outside the home presents problems for Afghan Red Crescent maternal and child health services and the basic health trainers' programme -- the two health programmes that the ARCS/Federation are trying to strengthen and expand.

It will be almost impossible to train more women for the maternal and child health service, thus ruling out any expansion of this service (although women already trained can continue to work for it.) Training in community based first aid and of youth volunteers will also be reduced.

Training of basic health trainers is scheduled to start soon in the ARCS branches of Helmand, Zabul, and Kandahar. Usually in these courses men have been taught in the morning and women in the afternoon. The women generally wear a burka (an all-covering garment) and often sit behind a screen. The ARCS trainer is in the process of checking with regional authorities whether the scheduled courses can be given to women. A health education course, attended only by men, is being given in Kabul this week. The Federation has been notified that health education videos and slides cannot be used for the course.

Despite the current uncertainties the ARCS/Federation is striving to maintain all of its programmes on behalf of 1.5 million beneficiaries among the vulnerable civilian population. They include running 42 outpatient clinics in 25 provinces, health training for teachers, nurses and other community workers, first aid training for volunteers in rural communities, emergency relief for the forthcoming winter and the development of a disaster preparedness programme. Planning is also underway to maintain and expand these programmes in 1997.

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