

# Nation & World



News throughout our nation and world relating to United Methodists of the Holston Conference

## UMCOR, MERCY CORPS CONTINUE WORK IN AFGHANISTAN



©2002 UMNS photo by David Sadoo

*An Afghan family looks over the pieces of a shelter kit provided by the United Methodist Committee on Relief to villagers near Hazar Bogh in the Taloqan region of northern Afghanistan.*

By United Methodist News Service

**UNITED METHODISTS**, already participating in the distribution of winterized tents and other supplies to families in northern Afghanistan, are considering additional ways to provide assistance.

A two-person assessment team representing the United Methodist Committee on Relief was to arrive in Kabul in early March, according to Gretchen Ansoorge, senior program officer for Eurasia in UMCOR's Nongovernmental Organization (NGO) office in Washington. The team is expected to spend several weeks in Afghanistan determining how best to use its resources and whether to open an office there or set up programs through existing organizations.

Either way, Ansoorge said, UMCOR will work in cooperation with other relief agencies, particularly members of Action by Churches Together (ACT).

That cooperation already is evident in the shelter project coordinated by the UMCOR office in Tajikistan and Mercy Corps, an ACT partner. Ansoorge and David Sadoo, an international field staff member for UMCOR in New York, were part of a team

accompanying the first three truckloads of shelter kits across the Tajikistan border and into Hazar Bogh in the Taloqan region of northern Afghanistan. The team remained in Afghanistan from Jan. 29 to Feb. 1.

"It's a whole different world there," Sadoo said, noting the lack of development and infrastructure. "It's almost a whole different century."

Hazar Bogh became a front line for the fighting between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, with both

sides contributing to the looting and destruction of many homes there. A four-year drought has compounded the suffering of inhabitants.

Sadoo noted that the mud houses or compounds that remain are sometimes missing doors, windows or even rooftops. "People are living in them or with their neighbors, but I wouldn't consider them habitable," he said of the houses.

The shelter kits being delivered to the region typically include a winter tent big enough to hold a family of six or seven; six blankets; three sleeping pads; three mattresses; three pillows and a stove. UMCOR/Mercy Corps also is distributing household kits containing basic cooking supplies, plates, cups, utensils, washbasins and water storage containers.

Both Sadoo and Ansoorge were impressed by the determination of the Afghan people to recover from their losses. "I was surprised by how quickly people were making an effort to improve their situation," Ansoorge said. "There wasn't a sense of desperation."

Sadoo added that the towns they visited were bustling with activity. Despite the drought, some food was available in the markets. "They've been through all this fighting, but they're not defeated," he explained.

The team also was treated to legendary Afghan hospitality. "They didn't have much, but they still insisted, at the end of the day, that we sit down to a meal with them," he said.

As the only woman in the UMCOR/Mercy Corps group, Ansoorge said she received stares from adults and

expressions of surprise from children, but felt no ill will. She also had the advantage of being able to enter a home and meet the women and children living there.

The shelter project, which received \$700,000 in funding through UMCOR's "Love in the Midst of Tragedy" offering, will continue through April 28. UMCOR's Web site, <http://gbgm-umc.org/umcor>, and a joint Web site, <http://umcor-afghan.netfirms.com/>, list more information about the project.

UMCOR has been working in the Central Asian republic of Tajikistan since 1999, offering educational and rehabilitation programs for youth as well as community development projects.

Mercy Corps has conducted relief and development work in Tajikistan since 1994 and in Afghanistan since 1984.

Donations to support UMCOR's emergency relief and long-term development work in Afghanistan can be made to UMCOR Advance No. 901125-3, designated for Afghanistan. Checks can be dropped in church collection plates. Call (800) 554-8583 to make a credit-card donation. ■

### news brief:

#### ■ Growing church seeks official status in Lithuania

**NASHVILLE, Tenn.** (UMNS) – Since the end of the communist era in Eastern Europe, the United Methodist Church has been growing steadily in the Baltic states of Latvia and Lithuania. Recognized as a traditional church in Latvia, the denomination is seeking similar status in Lithuania, where Methodism is regarded as a sect. Bishop Oystein Olsen, whose Northern Europe Area includes the Baltics, is optimistic that such recognition will be coming soon.

The church operates "rather freely" in both countries, Olsen said Feb. 23, after a meeting in Nashville. However, without state recognition in Lithuania, it cannot buy its own land and it is not exempt from taxes. The church officially requested recognition as a traditional church in 1999, and since then it has been working closely with Lithuania's Ministry of Justice on the matter. On Jan. 16, the Parliament's human rights committee approved the request for recognition, and the full assembly is to vote on the committee's recommendation this spring or summer. "We expect to be recognized," Olsen said. ■

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