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N.Y. Police, Firefighters Bond With Afghan Kids

At Kabul Orphanage, Delegation Mourns Toll on Innocents

By Kevin Sullivan
Washington Post Foreign Service

KABUL, Afghanistan, Dec. 21—New York City firefighter Joe Higgins strolled among hundreds of poor Afghan children at an orphanage here today, remembering his brother, a firefighter who was killed at the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, and the children he left fatherless.

"These kids are going through the same things that those kids at home are going through," said Higgins, wearing his heavy black FDNY jacket and passing out candy. "Their poverty is worse, and they have gone through the extremes of war, but I don't think the hurt's any different."

Higgins was one of four New York City firefighters and two New York police officers who flew to Afghanistan today to deliver 45 tons of rice, sugar, cooking oil, powdered milk and blankets to the children of this war-plagued country.

Members of the delegation, who also greeted U.S. soldiers here, said they felt a kinship with the Afghan people, who have been dominated for the past five years by the Taliban militia and Osama bin Laden, the man believed responsible for the Sept. 11 attacks.

"We're both victims of war and terrorism," said Detective Thomas McDonald. Four members of his Emergency Service Unit were among the 23 New York City police officers killed on Sept. 11. "We want to alleviate their suffering if we can, and maybe in some small way they can bring us some peace of mind."

McDonald, 31, a father of two, said he was "choked up" after greeting the children, who live in one of the most war-ravaged parts of Kabul. "You see these pretty little faces, so innocent and sweet, and for them to have to grow up in the middle of all this is heartbreaking," he said. "They are the innocents. They didn't do anything to deserve this."

After a 55-hour odyssey that took them from New York to the Netherlands, Belgium, Azerbaijan and the Bagram air base just north of Kabul, the delegation arrived at the Alaoodin orphanage here this afternoon to applause from hundreds of boys and girls lined up to greet them.

The New Yorkers, all wearing jackets stenciled with NYPD or FDNY, walked a 100-yard receiving line, accepting bouquets of flowers and greeting the children with broad New York accents: "Hello sweet-haht" to the girls and "How ya doin' buddy?" to the boys.

"I'm ready to cry. Just think of all these kids here. You want to know what war does? Just look at them," said the Rev. John Delendick, who carried a big bag of Tootsie Rolls. Delendick is chaplain of the fire department, which lost 343 members on Sept. 11.

"For the last three months, we've had so much goodness shown to us in New York," he said. "Good people came to show support. I just had to try to share that by coming here to support these people."

The trip was underwritten by Diageo, the food and beverage giant, through its Spirit of America Fund, which was established to provide humanitarian aid after Sept. 11. The fund paid for the goods delivered today and chartered the Russian cargo plane that carried them here.

Most of the 470 children who live in the Alaoodin orphanage, where they sleep 40 to a room and eat little more than tea and bread, had no idea who their visitors were. Kamal Uldin, an 11-year-old in Velcro sneakers and filthy clothes, said he had never heard of President Bush, Osama bin Laden or the events of Sept. 11. He said he has lived at the orphanage since his parents were killed seven years ago.

"I hear that New York and the United States are good places," he said.

Signs of war are all around the orphanage, which is located in a Kabul neighborhood that has been reduced virtually to rubble in wars and factional fighting in the last 20 years. Many of the buildings nearby are collapsed hulks, with bullet marks and huge holes left by artillery fire clearly visible.

Director Abdul Habib Samin said his orphanage suffered greatly under the Taliban. He said the orphanage also acts as a school for the children. But because the Taliban forbade girls from attending school, officials forced about 300 girls to leave the orphanage shortly after they took control of Kabul in 1996. Samin said he has no idea what became of the girls.

He and other orphanage employees said that the former director, a Taliban official, abused his power and forced or coerced three of the girls at the orphanage, ages 18, 17 and 15, into marrying his relatives. Since the Taliban was forced out of Kabul on Nov. 13 by Afghan opposition forces backed by U.S. airstrikes, more and more families are coming forward with stories of Taliban soldiers abducting women and girls and forcing them to marry.

Samin said that during the Taliban years, only religious subjects were allowed to be taught at the school, there was virtually no government funding and children went for five years without eating meat.

"The Taliban showed Islam in a bad light, they did bad things here," Samin said. "Since September 11 happened, Americans who lost their parents and children have felt our pain. Their children have become orphans, too."

During a ceremony in the orphanage's drafty auditorium, Shirin Aghia, an Education Ministry official, said Afghanistan and the United States had suffered the "shared pain" of terrorism. "The United States didn't forget us, and we are grateful," he added.

Said Malalai, a young girl from the orphanage, read a letter of thanks to the Americans, telling them, "We are not feeling alone anymore."

Higgins, 40, a former Marine who also runs a boxing gym on Long Island, traded boxing stories with a few Afghans, who love the sport. He passed out lollipops and hard candies to children. He gave his sweatshirt, from Ladder Company 111 of Brooklyn, to an Afghan man.

"Since September 11, I haven't complained about a thing," Higgins said. "After what I've seen today, I am never going to complain about another thing ever again."

Higgins repeatedly urged the children to take good care of their families. What he didn't tell them was his own story from Sept. 11. Higgins lost his brother, Fire Department Lt. Timothy Higgins, when the North Tower collapsed. Sixteen days later, Higgins and two of his other brothers, who are also firefighters, were the ones who found their brother's body in the rubble and pulled it out.

Higgins brought some of that rubble with him today. He handed a shard of one of the planes that hit the World Trade Center to a Special Forces soldier at Bagram. He also gave the soldiers pieces of concrete debris from the trade center, and he dumped more bits of it out the car window as he drove through Afghanistan.

"I really don't have a reason," he said "I just felt like doing it."



"We're both victims of war and terrorism," said New York City Detective Thomas McDonald, who delivered food to an orphanage in Kabul.

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