

Restaurant Mogador benefit aids International Midwife Assistance

By Andre Salvail

Aspen Daily News Staff Writer

BASALT — Jennifer Braun wept openly as she described the plight of women in Afghanistan who have little or no access to health care.

The Boulder resident and frequent visitor to the valley is program director for the nonprofit group International Midwife Assistance, which is working to train Afghan women to deliver babies more safely. The infant mortality rate in the war-torn country is about 20 percent, meaning babies have a one-in-

five chance of surviving their first birthday.

"There really is no health care for women," Braun said. "And the country is full of poverty and starvation and diseases that you and I have only heard of. It's said that one in four people don't have access to water at all. They are just dropping like flies.

"The heart-wrenching thing is that these are human beings. These are very nice people. They are not stupid, they are people. But they have been cut off from the world for

decades."

A benefit for International Midwife Assistance will be held from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. tonight at Restaurant Mogador on East Hyman Street in Aspen. Proceeds from the dinner and a silent auction will be used to help Braun with her goal of recruiting Western women to work in Afghanistan, teaching natives of the country how to deliver babies in their rural villages as well as educating women about birth control and

MOGADOR ON PAGE 3

Local News

MOGADOR FROM PAGE 1

other health care issues.

It's the second benefit at Restaurant Mogador in as many years. Last year, money was raised to help victims of the Indian Ocean tsunami.

Braun described her group as a Colorado-based "grassroots" organization providing direct aid to Afghan women who have struggled for more than two decades. Afghanistan's troubles began in 1979 when the Soviet army invaded the country. The war was fought to a stalemate and the invaders pulled out in the late 1980s.

Later, after years of civil war, the Taliban took over, promising to bring stability to the country — when in fact the radical Muslims were merely using Afghanistan as a training ground for worldwide terrorist activity.

In 2001, after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on America, the United States successfully wrested control of most of Afghanistan from the Taliban, and foreign aid was expected to pour into the country. But aside from its overthrow of the Taliban, Braun sees little evidence that U.S. government aid is making a difference.

"Our government is throwing a lot of money into (the Afghan capital) Kabul, but you can't find it. There's an enormous amount of graft. It's outrageous. The Laura Bush Hospital in Kabul doesn't even have running water," Braun said.

"There is visible reconstruction going on by the Germans and the Japanese. They are visible, the United States is not. We are on the Pakistani border lobbing mortar at who knows what."

Braun said in a traditional Muslim society, men provide health care services for men and women provide health care for women. U.S. armed forces have helped to bring some health services to Afghan men, but the level of care for Afghan women has not been as good.

"It has been very hard to recruit Western-trained women to work in Afghanistan," she said. "Nobody wants to do it. Nobody wants to live there."

IMA most recently has been working in the Afghan province Bamiyan. The people there were particularly oppressed by the Taliban because they are an ethnic minority with Asian roots.

"Bamiyan has the dubious honor of being one of the two poorest provinces in Afghanistan," Braun said. "Because of how persecuted they were by the Taliban, nobody is harboring the Taliban there. So it's a uniquely safe environment for Americans."

"The Afghan people love America. They are grateful to our government for kicking the Taliban out. But there are places in Afghanistan where the Taliban is still in control. And that's what's dangerous to you, in terms of getting shot or kidnapped or something."

Braun found a partner with which to work: the Paris-based charity Aghakhan, which has founded a hospital in Bamiyan. "For Afghanistan, it's an extraordinary facility, and it's only getting better. The biggest shortage is American-trained women health care workers, nurses, midwives, obstetricians ... that's what they lack."

The working conditions are grim, medicines are limited and access to health care technology is largely nonexistent, she said.

"We can open someone up and take out their tumors, but we don't know what they are," Braun said. "We do our best. The big killer of women in childbirth is postpartum hemorrhage. We can handle that, we can stop the bleeding, but if something more complex is going on, it's much harder to deal with."

Historically, Afghanistan is not "a nasty place" for women, she said. Prior to the Soviet Army's invasion, the country was somewhat Westernized and a popular tourist destination.

"The country definitely devolved under the Taliban," Braun said. "The women don't have sexual freedom. They do what they're told. They are like livestock. Their humanity is not recognized."



Jennifer Braun