

## **Overview of Afghanistan**

### **Geography:**

Afghanistan is a land-locked country in central Asia. It is a small country – a little smaller than Texas – but it has a big history and a rich culture!

### **People and Languages:**

The people of Afghanistan speak many different languages, particularly Dari (a form of Persian) and Pashto. (Notice that people do NOT speak Arabic as a native language – though some learn Arabic in school.) People belong to many different ethnic groups too. Almost everyone is Muslim; most belong to the Sunni branch, but others are Shi'a. (Sunni and Shi'a are two kinds of Muslims, just as Protestants and Catholics are different kinds of Christians.) Most people are illiterate, meaning they don't know how to read or write. This is because of many years of war that interrupted people's education and the fact that girls were not allowed to attend school during the time of the Taliban. The life expectancy is much shorter than in the U.S. since many babies die at birth; young children often die because of lack of medical care; and fighting claims the lives of others.

### **Modern History:**

Afghanistan has had a long history, but during the past several hundred years, it has been controlled by Great Britain (England) and Russia. By the 1960s, however, Afghanistan seemed to be succeeding as an independent country. It even had a constitution and an elected government.

In the 1970s, however, Afghani people started fighting about what kind of government they wanted. By 1979, the Soviet Union began sending military forces to help one side of the conflict. For the next 10 years, there was fighting: both a civil war (with different groups of Afghans fighting each other) and an invasion by the Soviet army. Many people were killed, and millions of others became refugees, people who left their homes to flee to a neighboring country (Pakistan or Iran).

In 1988 and early 1989, the Soviet army left Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the civil war continued and grew worse. By 1994 a group named the Taliban started gaining control in Afghanistan. Soon they took over the entire country. The Taliban were Muslim fundamentalists, which means that they

wanted their strict religious values to become the law of the country. Men had to let their beards grow and had to follow many rules. But life was especially terrible for women. Women were forbidden to work and could not go out of the house without a man accompanying them. (Since many men had died fighting in the wars, this meant that many women and children were starving.) They were required to wear the burqa, a veil covering their entire body. Girls were not allowed to go to school – and people who taught or attended secret girls' schools could be killed. Many people didn't like this government, so fighting continued too.

By the late 1990s, the United Nations – and the United States – was against the Taliban government because of the terrible things it was doing to its own people and its terrorist bombings abroad. Then in 2001, the Taliban assisted al-Qaeda and its leader, Osama bin-Laden, after they attacked the twin towers in New York City and the Pentagon Building in Washington DC on September 11. (Although Osama bin-Laden was from Saudi Arabia, he was living in Afghanistan.) The U.S. declared war on Afghanistan and kicked the Taliban out of power.

Today Afghanistan has a new, elected government, and international troops have tried to help rebuild the country. However, fighting continues in many parts of the country. The Taliban is still an important force that is trying to take over Afghanistan again. Whether or not they succeed, there are still many important issues on which people disagree: How should women dress and behave? Should girls go to school? Should all education be religious? How should the government be organized? Which ethnic group should lead the country? The answers to these questions will have a big effect on the life of the people of Afghanistan – and as we learned on September 11, 2001, they could affect our lives as well.