

Eberhard Mühlen with Georg Taubmann

Return to Kabul

Georg Taubmann's thrilling return to Kabul after his captivity and the rebuilding of the Shelter Now Development Agency

35 Years of Shelter Now International

From its exciting beginnings up to the present

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Introduction

Thousands have read of the imprisonment – which lasted more than three months - of the eight Shelter Now International¹ Development Workers in the book “Imprisoned in Kabul”. The Taliban held them as hostages as a result of the Al Qaeda terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on 11th September 2001. They were to be used in exchange for terrorists and in negotiations with the American Forces during their acts of reprisal in Afghanistan. Their dramatic release by American Special forces from the clutches of the Taliban was extremely risky.

“If God had not done so many miracles, we would not have come out alive,” Georg Taubmann, leader of the team, explained later.

Shelter Now has been working for 35 years among Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Afghanistan. They help with primary care through the provision of food, drinking water and medical aid among the refugees. They built outpatient clinics, schools and thousands of mud houses for the Afghans who were streaming across the border into Pakistan in their tens of thousands, and being accommodated in provisional refugee camps in desert-like areas by the Pakistan Government.

¹ “Shelter Now International” will henceforth be shortened to „Shelter Now“. The name “Shelter” bears testimony to the philosophy of the Aid Organisation: Christian love of one’s neighbour means both to feed the poorest of the poor and also to provide a roof over one’s head.

In 1983 Shelter Now got involved for the first time in the primary care of refugees. Due to the Russian invasion in 1979 and the establishment of a Communist system in Afghanistan hundreds of thousands of refugees poured across the border into neighbouring Pakistan. Years later Shelter Now looked after

Afghans from the former Communist regime who had to flee the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Shelter Now specialised initially in the production and construction of low cost houses made of prefabricated concrete, and later also in building mud houses so that the refugees no longer had to live under tarpaulin and tents in the burning heat. Reconstruction projects for those returning to ruined villages in Afghanistan were added later.

Several times the Shelter Now staff found themselves in life threatening situations through attacks

and kidnappings. Twice their projects were totally demolished and plundered. Damages amounting to several million Euros accrued. The organisation had to be closed down, the foreign workers had to leave the country. The first time in 1990 it was

God cannot be excluded from the life story of Georg Taubmann. His organisation has always made it a rule to help everyone in need in Pakistan and Afghanistan, regardless of their religious or political affiliation.

His life speaks volumes and reflects the command of Jesus, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul...and your neighbour as yourself" (Matt 22:37)

A politician said once after an event, "By his commitment Mr Taubmann has redefined the Christian faith!"

It is fascinating to read how Georg brings God into his daily life, speaks with him and listens to his instructions.]

through fanatical Islamists in Pakistan, the second time in 2001 it was through radical Taliban fighters in Afghanistan.

Both times Georg Taubmann began rebuilding the relief organisation out of nothing, in spite of murder threats and kidnap attempts. His love for the suffering Afghan people and his deep faith allowed him no rest and drove him to achieve what was almost humanly impossible.

In 2018 Shelter Now will be 35 years old. The origins and the history of this organisation are more thrilling than a detective novel – except that it is not fiction, but the real truth. In this book you can read of its exciting beginnings and follow the chronology of Shelter Now.

This book is the continuation of the best seller “Imprisoned in Kabul”. Only a few months after the privations and dangers of their imprisonment and dramatic liberation Georg Taubmann was already collecting a team and starting again in Afghanistan. Allow yourself to be drawn into the thrilling return and the reconstruction of the projects despite renewed threats of kidnapping. Excerpts from the out-of-print book “Imprisoned in Kabul” are included to explain the background.

We are going back to Afghanistan!

One thing amazed, indeed irritated the German as well as the international press. Despite all the privations and dangers, the four German Shelter Now aid workers declared after their dramatic liberation from the besieged city of Ghazni that they would return to Afghanistan as soon as possible to rebuild their aid projects. "Where do they get this courage and confidence from?" many wondered. For more than three months they had been held as hostages in different prisons in Kabul in inhuman conditions and more than once were in danger of losing their lives.

Scarcely had they climbed out of the rescue helicopter and introduced themselves at the first press conference at the German Embassy in Islamabad than they announced, "We're going back and will carry on!" Even though all their personal belongings had been stolen by Taliban thugs and their offices and projects in Afghanistan had largely been plundered.

Georg Taubmann: Even during my time in prison it was clear to me that I would return to Afghanistan, if only we could manage to get out alive. In spite of all the terrible things which we observed and experienced, I felt extremely close to the Afghans – especially to those who, like us, were in prison though innocent and were subject to dreadful mistreatment. After the dramatic release by American Special Forces on 15 November 2001 in Ghazni, we flew into Islamabad that morning by

helicopter. That same evening there was the first press conference at the German Embassy. Press representatives from all around the world were present. I told them our story: beginning with the trap which was set by the Taliban Religious Police for two of our female American colleagues, the kidnapping of us eight Shelter Now workers, the accusation that we had converted Muslims, right up to our 103-day incarceration (the two American women were 105 days in prison) and the unexpected rescue. Finally in the name of all the Germans who

“This Taubmann was imprisoned for three and a half months. Always staring death in the face. When they were taken to trial, he never knew if it was to the courts or to his execution. The man was freed a year ago – ludicrous! He is back in Afghanistan! Others would have to work through their trauma for two years. But he is back there and is doing something.” Original recording of the former Employment and Social Policy Minister, Norbert Blum – Stern-TV 2002]

had been set free, I said that we all had the desire to return to Afghanistan as soon as possible. Especially now that the Taliban had been overthrown, the devastated country would need as much help as possible to rebuild. I stressed also that we would forgive those who had wrecked our relief

organisation and done us so much evil. Of course we had been on an emotional roller coaster and had had intermittent feelings of fear and hatred, but we were Christians and were prepared to forgive. Just as it says in our most important prayer, the Lord’s Prayer, “... and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”



Georg and Marianne embrace after more than three months.

The three German women staff immediately after their release:

Margrit Stebner: I want to go back again – in spite of all the difficult experiences and dangers. What we experienced in prison has helped me to understand the Afghans better and to identify with their needs. We suffered in part with them and I want that to bring us closer together.

In addition we now hope with some justification to be able to achieve more, above all with projects for women. I won't be discouraged and want to meet their needs as best I can.

Katrin Jelinek: Afghanistan is simply my place! They say “Suffering creates close bonds!” I have got a deeper love for the country and the Afghans than I ever had before. I’m looking forward to the extension of the children’s project in Kabul and especially that we can at last include the girls.

Afghanistan stands on the threshold of a new beginning and I want to be there. That is the task which God has given me and which gives meaning to my life.

Silke Dürrkopf: My job as a teacher of the children of the development staff was merely interrupted during the imprisonment. I feel committed to them. When the families fly back to Afghanistan, I’ll be with them.

The street children and the construction of schools are also close to my heart. A few weeks ago I happened to see three of our street children in a picture of a crowd of people in Kabul in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. They were wearing shoes and jackets which they had received from us last winter. When I saw them in the picture, I had a renewed sense that I belong in Afghanistan.

In April 2002 Georg Taubmann returned with his family first to Pakistan and then in June 2002 to Afghanistan. Silke Dürrkopf accompanied them and worked again for Shelter Now. She stayed till 2004. In October 2002 Margrit Stebner followed the Taubmann family. She remained till 2007. Katrin Jelinek returned

to Kabul only in 2007 – together with her husband and two children. However one year later they had to return to Germany for health reasons.

In the Spotlight in Germany

Being imprisoned for more than three months inevitably leaves an impact. Even if Georg himself was not beaten, he was unable to eradicate from his memory the despairing cries of his abused fellow prisoners. The filth, the insects, the cramped cell, the dirty, stinking overflowing toilets, the meagre food, no medical care, the isolation, the long trials, the fear for his wife Marianne and his two sons, all that had embedded itself deep in his psyche – above all being totally at the mercy of these unpredictable brutal men.

And then suddenly the loud, garish, hectic life of freedom. The many interviews in Islamabad with media organisations from all over the world were but a prelude to what was awaiting them in Germany.

Georg Taubmann: On our return to Germany we spent about a week as a whole team at a secret location in France to recover from the stress. Well protected from press and publicity. We were able to sleep, go for walks, pray together – simply relax. Under guided supervision we chatted a lot with one another and learned for the first time how each of us had experienced and processed the days in prison. In addition the psychologists gave us good tips on how to process our experiences in the future. After that Marianne and I were able to have a few days holiday, but then it all took off in Germany – one engagement after another.

The Mayor of Braunschweig invited Margrit, Katrin and Silke to the City Hall and honoured them publicly. In the Braunschweig Christuszentrum a Praise and Thanksgiving Service was held, in which hundreds of guests from home and abroad participated – and of course the press.

The same in Würzburg, Nürnberg, Munich and Berlin. Georg's home city of Sulzbach-Rosenberg gave a large reception. The four were ferried from place to place and had to tell their story again and again.



The three German Shelter Now colleagues (Margrit, Katrin and Silke) at the Reception given by the Mayor of their home town Braunschweig

Review of the Year with Günther Jauch

One of the highlights was taking part in the Review of the Year with the TV personality Günther Jauch. At the end of each year Günther Jauch arranges an annual review with the TV station RTL "People, Pictures, Emotions", interviewing prominent figures and personalities who have been worthy of note in that year. The year 2001 had probably been the most dramatic year for decades. The whole world had been appalled by the dreadful attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on 11th September. Because of that, those affected by the attack - like one of the courageous firefighters and some who had experienced the attack and had escaped, appeared on the programme.

But for Günther Jauch the Shelter Now people were the highlight of the evening. Again and again during the programme their appearance was mentioned, and then they had the prime slot at the end of the programme. Günther Jauch already knew the Shelter Now volunteers from a previous broadcast in which he had interviewed Katrin's brother and the Chairman of Shelter Now Germany, Udo Stolte, and had shown great sympathy towards the hostages. Now he was thrilled and delighted to see them alive and free in front of him. His questions, his participation and his praise revealed his commitment and sympathy.

Reception for the Foreign Office Crisis Committee

On the evening following the Review of the Year with Günther Jauch in Cologne, the Shelter Now team flew to Berlin to arrange a reception for the Foreign Office Crisis Committee.

The idea stemmed from Georg's brother. He called Udo Stolte, the Director of Shelter Now Germany. "Hey, the Crisis Committee got so involved on our behalf. They were always there for us. We must show our gratitude. Let's do something together. Money's no object. What if my brother were dead by now? Can you not take that on?"

Udo called the Foreign Ministry. "Yes, we have something like a café upstairs. You could do something there. We also know a good catering service."

Udo Stolte: We had the space, now I had to get a guest list together. I invited everyone from the top: the Federal Chancellor, the Foreign Minister, the President. After all, the President of the USA, George Bush, had received the two freed Americans and shaken their hands. Everyone wrote back politely refusing. That left the Crisis Committee, some employees from the Foreign Ministry and from the Secret Service. I also invited the Diocesan Bishop from Wolfenbüttel, Christian Krause, to give a short devotional as he had done so much for us. Together with our colleagues there were around 50 people. It was a lovely evening. At the conclusion the Head of the Crisis Committee said, "We have never experienced anything like this. We have been very involved with many citizens in crisis situations and rarely heard a word of thanks afterwards, but instead reproach. I consider it a great honour to have had a reception with so much gratitude from you."

Reception by the Federal President in Schloss Bellevue

Georg Taubmann: A few weeks after the Review of the Year with Günther Jauch and the Crisis Committee Reception, we were invited on the 6th January 2002 to the Annual Presidential Reception with Federal President Johannes Rau and his wife in Schloss Bellevue. This was an even more important event, as on this occasion German citizens who have achieved something special are honoured.

After our arrival in Berlin we were accommodated in a posh hotel. The following morning we were picked up and the red

carpet was rolled out for us. The press surrounded us and carefully listened to every word the President spoke. On this occasion the President makes a formal declaration as to why the citizen concerned is being honoured. He had only words of praise for our longstanding development aid projects in Paki-



Georg Taubmann at the Annual Reception in Schloss Bellevue with President Johannes Rau

stan and Afghanistan, above all for our bravery and powers of

The Annual Presidential Reception

In order to participate in the Annual Presidential Reception at the Schloss Bellevue, the citizen must be proposed by an organisation. The person and his involvement are then inspected by a State Commission, to see whether they merit such an honour. The Shelter Now projects were thoroughly assessed by the chief officer of the working panel Humanitarian Aid Abroad. On his return he called Udo and had only very positive comments. At the end he said, "Mr Stolte, I congratulate you on your work." At a meeting in Berlin of NGOs working in Afghanistan he announced publicly "The way Shelter Now works is the way humanitarian aid should be administered." During the imprisonment of the aid workers, Shelter Now's development projects in Pakistan were visited anyway by journalists from all over the world and examined closely – only the projects in Afghanistan were destroyed or closed. Pakistani and Afghan colleagues kept the projects in Pakistan going without any Western leadership. This autonomy made a deep impression on the journalists. The Afghan workers later told Georg that during his absence they were bombarded with questions, like whether they had been pressurised or even bribed to convert. Which in all good conscience they were able to deny.]

endurance during our imprisonment.

After that in all the newspapers and magazines in Germany there were only positive reports about Shelter Now. Georg was naturally delighted, as the very first press reports, some of which had reached them in prison, had been thoroughly accusatory and negative – as if they had behaved stupidly and got themselves irresponsibly in danger. The false accusations of the Taliban were uncritically accepted, that Shelter Now had spread Christian material widely and used their relief aid and offers of education to convert Muslims. It would have required only a little research to reveal how groundless the accusations were.

Press Scrums and Crisis Management in Germany

Udo Stolte, the Director of Shelter Now Germany, was spending some time with his wife in Kabul when the two American women were apprehended by the Religious Police. On that fateful Friday evening, 3rd August 2001, he took part in the volunteers' meeting and led the devotions. "During the course of the evening we became more and more anxious because the two women didn't turn up", he remembers. "Later we learned that they had been taken captive by the Taliban, but imagined that they would be released again after a few days, at worst expelled from the country."

The return flight was planned for Saturday but the flight from Kabul was cancelled. He therefore took a taxi on the Sunday morning and travelled the 280 km by road to the Shelter Now staff in Peshawar in Pakistan. From there he was supposed to fly back to Frankfurt via Dubai on the Tuesday. Udo was under time pressure as his school started on Wednesday.

Udo Stolte: It was in Peshawar that we learned through “Radio Shariat” that 24 Shelter Now colleagues had been taken captive, charged with Christian proselytising. My friend Georg was one of them. I was appalled! The top man in Shelter Now was in prison, and as number two in the leadership I suddenly bore the whole burden of crisis management!

On the Sunday evening I called a crisis meeting and gathered the Peshawar team around me. Everyone was totally shocked. White as sheets they crouched down in a circle, paralysed. I had to get a grip on the situation. Fortunately I always had the ability to keep a cool head in a crisis. When for example an accident happened on a school outing and my colleagues reacted in total panic, I was able to think clearly and take the necessary decisions. It was the same now: “Who will deal with media questions? Who will inform the prayer partners? Who will be responsible for this and that?” I organised the staff and a semblance of peace returned to the group.

I took part in the prayers – for me it was three o’clock in the morning. While we were praying I had the impression that God was speaking to me. “Udo, the press will descend on you like a flood. Have courage and jump into the flood. I am with you!” Up till then I had had little contact with the press. Writing an article here, an announcement there, that was all. I had no experience and no skills in dealing with the media. As would soon become clear, they were indeed initially very aggressive and knew how to ask mean questions.

Udo and Sieglinde Stolte have known and accompanied the Shelter Now organisation since its inception. Udo has had a close relationship with Georg since the time Georg was living in Braunschweig. They were the contact persons in Germany for the Taubmanns and maintained a small home office from which they sent out information letters and managed donations.

In 1992 Udo visited his friend Georg in Pakistan. "I returned from there a changed person," Udo reports. "Never in my life have I witnessed such need and such misery. In the massive refugee camps I saw children playing in the sewer as if it were clean water...that turned my life upside down."

Back in Germany Udo became more keenly involved in the aid projects. In 1993 Shelter Now Germany was founded. Udo was a primary school teacher. Soon he wasn't able to fulfil all his school commitments; since 1996 he had been constantly reducing his hours – until at the beginning of 2002 he gave up his teaching job altogether and from then on has officially headed up the German branch of Shelter Now International from Braunschweig.]

The Shelter Now workers were taken captive at the weekend, Udo arrived in Braunschweig on the following Wednesday evening. He gave his colleagues in Braunschweig strict instructions to give no interviews as they had insufficient information at their disposal. But for the media the period from Sunday to Wednesday is a short eternity. As they got no information, they indulged in wild speculation.

Udo Stolte: At Braunschweig station my colleagues met me straight away on the platform. Their first words were “You’ve got to appear before the press. The reporters are on our heels and pressurising us continually for information.” But I was totally exhausted and sweaty and unshaven. “I can’t appear before the press like this,” I protested. “But you must. They won’t wait any longer.” Scarcely had I arrived at the office and they were there: ARD, ZDF, the Braunschweig News and other journalists. The crazy thing was that they didn’t want a general press conference, but wanted to interview me personally, one after the other.

The next morning things really took off. At six o’clock the first radio stations called and wanted to interview me on the phone for their early news bulletins. And so it continued, right through till the beginning of school. During my classes I didn’t dare turn off my mobile phone. Each time it vibrated I glanced at the caller-display. I knew that Georg had my number in his head, and I was clinging to the hope that he would contact me. Maybe he’d been released or could call me from the prison. During the breaks between classes I dealt with the most urgent enquiries and after school it was straight back into the office. Different TV teams who again wanted to interview me personally were already awaiting me there. The whole afternoon went by in half-hour slots. While one broadcaster was dismantling his equipment and the next one setting his up, I was handling telephone interviews in between. That went on until early evening. Then I had a little peace, as the interviews had to be worked on by the journalists for the evening news. Later in the evening the enquiries came mostly from abroad.

The whole of the next few weeks followed the same pattern. But it wasn’t only the press hustle and bustle, the whole crisis management fell on my shoulders. Relatives had to be kept

informed and comforted and churches who wanted to pray and to help needed to be updated. In addition I was constantly in touch with the Crisis Committee of the Foreign Office and with various Embassies.



Udo Stoltze during a TV interview

During the three and a half months of their captivity as hostages Udo estimates that he gave roughly around 1000 interviews. Then when his friends were released the enquiries increased dramatically. All the broadcasters descended on Udo, wanting to hear the very latest news. But it wasn't only in Germany that the media racket went wild. In Pakistan too 3000 journalists from all over the world were waiting – so great was the interest in the hostage taking and the liberation of the eight Shelter Now workers.

On the night of their release Udo was just getting ready for a programme with Günther Jauch.

Udo Stolte: With programmes like that they keep the most exciting people till the end, so that the audience keeps watching and also sees lots of advertisements. I was sitting in the green room with the person who had prepared everything and taken the pre-interviews. There were snacks and I was following the programme, when suddenly my mobile rang. Georg's brother Reinhold was at the other end. "Udo, something's going on. I just got a phone call that the Delta Force of the US Army is on its way." What that meant exactly we couldn't explain. But there was something in the air. The person in charge noticed of course that something special was going on and asked inquisitively, "So, anything significant?" I put him off. I didn't want to share the news yet. I couldn't be sure. Shortly after the phone call came my part in the interview with Günther Jauch. I couldn't concentrate properly, because the thought was going round and round in my head "What if their release is happening right now?" The broadcast was soon over and we were sitting together comfortably in the canteen. Günter Jauch sat down beside me at the table and was interested in knowing further details about my friends in Kabul. Previously the professional, now the private Günther Jauch.

During the conversation the phone rings again. This time it is the BBC. "Mr Stolte, we have heard something. What's going on there? Can you give us an interview?" My answer: "I don't know anything definite. I cannot tell you anything." When further broadcasters call with the same question, I become suspicious and ring the Foreign Office. "We know nothing," is their response. "Then please get yourself some information, and call me back," I reply.

Then the evening is over, we're just arriving at the entrance to the hotel in a taxi. It is 2 o'clock in the morning. My mobile

rings. It is the Foreign Office: "Mr Stolte, we have good news for you. Your people are en route to Pakistan." Moved and beaming with joy, I relate this to the TV crew. They drag me into the bar and buy me round after round of champagne. I only take a few sips for I know the interviews are about to start. And yes, I am besieged till 5 o'clock in the morning.

It has come this far. Excitedly Udo waits at Frankfurt Airport to be one of the first to greet his friends. A top official from the Foreign Office is there too. He had found out that there would be a press conference. "Can you please be there and support me?" asks Udo. The official agrees.

Udo Stolte: The journalists are already falling all over me. "Now that your colleagues are free, the two American women have admitted that they did proselytise using the Jesus film." Again the same old story. "What did they do?" I reply. "They showed an excerpt from the Jesus film which can be bought in most Islamic countries. What's the problem?" That silenced the hecklers.

Then comes the next set of questions: "Your people said that they're going back." The implication being, they want to put themselves in danger again and get themselves released at Government expense. "Yes, they said they would go back when the security situation allows it," I answer calmly. "And what does the Government have to say about that?" a journalist explodes. At this question all eyes turn to the government representative. His inspired answer: "Throughout all the years Shelter Now has carried out fantastic work. There is scarcely any other

organisation which has brought so much change in Afghanistan. The Federal Government would be happy for these aid measures to continue.”

It was good that the camera was focussed on the Foreign Office official. At that moment I probably looked like a rabbit caught in the headlights. The answer was simply brilliant.

Looking Back: Taken Hostage, Rescued

On every occasion that Georg talked about their arrest, the three-month captivity and their sudden release out of the hands of the Taliban – whether on Review of the Year with Günther Jauch or at the many celebratory Church services and Award ceremonies - the story of their dramatic release by American Special Forces is the most thrilling. And Georg is a good story-teller! The listeners hang on his every word. Wild applause always follows. Some are amazed at the circumspection of the team leader and the good fortune they had. Others suspect or know that God kept his protective hand over them. Georg himself is convinced, “If God had not worked so many miracles, we would probably not have come out alive.”

When the American Airforce bombard Kabul as a reaction to the attack on the World Trade Center in New York and the troops of the Northern Alliance are about to free the city and also the eight Shelter Now workers from Taliban rule, heavily armed Taliban storm the prison. They intend to drag the Shelter Now volunteers off to Kandahar as hostages, to the stronghold of Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda militia and the residence of the Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar – clearly to murder them there. At an intermediate stop in Ghazni, a city under the control of the Taliban, the foreigners are accommodated in the city jail.

Suddenly fighting between the local tribal people and the Taliban occupying forces breaks out. The insurgents storm the prison. Their strength is so superior that the Taliban have to flee without being able to take their hostages with them. All the

prisoners are released, among them the eight Shelter Now development workers. Now at last the American Special Forces can be contacted and the liberation initiated. That however all proceeds more dramatically than planned.

Taken Hostage

Excerpt from the book “Imprisoned in Kabul”

Day 102: 12. November 2001

Georg Taubmann: “Mr George,” as I was called by the other Afghans imprisoned with me, “have you heard any news? How close is the Northern Alliance to Kabul now? Ten kilometres or less?”

Our fellow Afghan prisoners excitedly discussed the different possibilities. There were about ten of them who had already received the death penalty. Some awaited amputation as punishment – they would have been the first to be killed by the guards in the event of a capitulation. And in spite of that they were deeply concerned about our uncertain fate: about my colleague Peter who shared a cell with me, as well as the six women who were held in the floor above us.

The sound of aeroplanes penetrated the prison walls. Heavy artillery fire could be heard coming closer and closer and considerably more frequently than it had been in recent days. The walls shook, window panes rattled, the floor vibrated and the tension was almost unbearable. The Afghan prisoners were running excitedly to and fro in the corridor between the cells.

As eight o'clock approached, I became really restless; with the best will in the world I could not see any way out of our increasingly dangerous situation. On the one hand possible bombing of the prison, on the other brainless Taliban fighters who could do whatever they wanted with us. What was I to do? The confusion and the tension were tearing me apart to such an extent that I could hardly think straight. And I was the one supposed to be making the right decisions at this crucial moment. Fear

gripped me. What if some harm should come to one of the eight of us right before being released? I didn't dare think about it.

"If the Taliban dare to touch you foreigners, we will defend you," said Mustafa, who had touchingly cared for us in recent weeks and had become my friend. He kept making plans as to how he could free us from the dreadful prison. One time he had even acquired special saw-blades from the bazaar and got them smuggled into our wing of the prison.

"Here, I've got something for you. We can saw through the bars and get you out."

"Thank you that you are so concerned about us, Mustafa. But I can't agree. I don't want anyone to be put in danger or indeed shot dead while trying to escape," I responded.

Now he took me aside again and pleaded with me, "You know, we're sure the Taliban are coming and they'll abduct you. Who knows what they'll do to you? They'll kill you or drag you off to Kandahar." "But what can we do about it?" I asked in despair.

"Listen! We have a plan. I've spoken to some of the guards upstairs and paid them off. They won't stand in our way. But they know that the game's up. We've hidden three Kalashnikovs (sub-machine guns designed in Russia) in a small room. At eleven o'clock we'll go upstairs and spend the night there. When the Taliban come we'll overpower them and make off in their vehicles."

"Oh no," I thought, "there's no way this can end well!"

But despite many persuasive arguments I could not deter my friend from his plan. So I kept quiet.

The ceiling above me was shaking from the heavy artillery fire, although our wing of the prison was almost two metres underground. The pressure and the sense of panic brought me out in a cold sweat. In order to find some sort of peace, I crawled into a tiny box-room and groaned "Oh God! Don't allow them to kill us or to take us captive – and please not to Kandahar!" Slowly I became calmer.

Outside in the prison yard there was a sudden commotion. I could hear rough commands being shouted. Vehicles came and went.

Presumably valuable objects and important documents were being removed.

“There’s something brewing! I’ve got to speak to our women colleagues. But how?” My brain was spinning. I went to the guards and said, “I’ve got to go up to the women and fetch some medication. Diana is a nurse.”

One of them led me upstairs. I knocked on their cell door and quickly gave the women my instructions: “The Northern Alliance is only a few kilometres from Kabul. Something’s going to happen in the next few hours and it may be dramatic.” I tried hard not to show my anxiety.

“Barricade the cell door. Whatever happens, don’t open it until you hear me. We must do everything possible to stick together!”

I spoke in German so that the guard couldn’t understand. Then I took the packet of medicines and ambled as casually as possible back downstairs.

Georg had been able to warn the women just in the nick of time; shortly before ten o’clock some vehicles suddenly showed up. Footsteps echoed through the entrance, keys jangled at the main gate. A noisy group of Taliban ran down the corridors and hammered on the door of the cell where the six women were being held. “Open up! Open up! Out, out!”

“No,” answered Diana firmly. “We’ll only come out when Georg comes.”

The men, furious, kept hammering on the door.

“Get Georg and Peter here and we’ll open up!”

Diana knew only too well that it would have been no problem for the Taliban to knock down the door, but she remained firm. And the men actually gave in to her refusal and stormed down to Peter and Georg’s cell below.

In the meantime they had both heard the excited men’s voices above them and were incredibly fearful about their female colleagues. Then when they stared at the Taliban with their Kalashnikov safety catches

released and saw their tense faces, they hurriedly packed a few of their belongings together and hurried upstairs.

When they reached the women's cell Georg shouted nervously, "Diana, Diana, open up. They are really serious. They'll shoot!"

The women quickly opened the door.

"Get out! You don't need to take anything with you. We're only taking you to a safe location for the night," the guards ordered.

The women however took no notice. They had been lied to too many times. And so they quickly packed their blankets and their few pieces of clothing. Then the eight of them were shoved outside where two vehicles stood waiting. The Taliban were going to separate them into two groups.

"Whatever happens, we must stay together!" was Georg's constant thought.

In the previous weeks he had constantly been worried that something could happen to the women if they fell into the hands of vengeful Taliban, without the men.

So Georg insisted, "We are not going to be separated."

As time was pressing, the guards agreed. With their pitiful luggage they stumbled on to the two benches in the back of the Toyota Landcruiser. An armed guard crouched beside them. It was only then that Georg noticed several live grenades lying on the floor. When the vehicle finally raced away, they were sitting more on top of each other than beside each other. The second vehicle, packed with more armed Taliban, accompanied them from behind.

Margrit Stebner: It was quite a shock for me when they took us out of the cell. Suddenly these aggressive men with their Kalashnikovs at the ready! You could see that they wouldn't show much consideration. You don't forget that sight. Hours previously I'd felt intuitively that something awful was going to happen to us. I was quite churned up inside.

I was the first one to climb into the Landcruiser and landed in a corner at the front on the Taliban's baggage. Then our luggage was added, leaving me half buried under it all. I could hardly move, I could barely breathe and was having real panic attacks. And then I realised we were going in the direction of Kandahar, even though Georg evaded our questions. The whole business was so surreal, so uncanny. So all I could do was pray. I had no words. I just suppressed the fear deep inside. At the same time I had an unforgettable experience in the midst of the chaos. It was as if someone inside me was laughing. An inner voice said, "You're on the way to freedom!"

"That can't be true," I thought. And yet, I felt God very close. The oppression and the panic had gone.

Georg Taubmann: "Where might they be taking us to? To another prison or maybe to Kandahar?" were my first thoughts.

First we travelled to the city centre. I knew the area well. The driver raced along the streets so fast that we almost had an accident. They were in a huge hurry!

Next we went past the Hotel Intercontinental, then down the street to this large silo and I thought: now we're going to the road that leads to Wardak, from there to Ghazni and then on to Kandahar.

The women were anxious, but kept remarkably calm.

"Georg, do you know where we are? Where are we heading to?" one of them asked.

I simply didn't want to mention the name of this terrifying city and replied, "I think we're heading to Wardak."

"And where is Wardak? Is that towards the Pakistani border?"

"No, not exactly."

Then we were out of the city and actually going in the direction of Kandahar. The arterial road was full of vehicles with fleeing Taliban fighters. But our two jeeps passed the queue of cars at breakneck speed. Armed men were crowding every road. It was unbelievable how many

people were fleeing from the city as fast as they could. I caught sight of some army tanks travelling South. The incessant bombing had so worn down the fighters that they were taking to their heels in panic.

We overtook them all at speed and after about an hour we turned off the road on to a track leading to a village, where we were greeted by Mullah Hassan Yashim. He was a top official in the Taliban regime and responsible for our imprisonment.

“Aha,” I thought to myself, “it was too hot for you then in Kabul so you got out before us.”

Mullah Hassan Yashim got into the second jeep; I felt very uneasy, indeed I was seized with fear. This man was capable of anything. That he had personally received us was not a good sign. In the prison he was considered especially cruel, as he himself gratuitously beat up and tortured the prisoners. He hadn’t beaten us up but he had always been rough and unfriendly.

Our journey continued for another two or three hours racing past darkened villages. Again and again we were stopped at checkpoints, road-blocks, where we were checked. Each time I hoped that they’d recognise us as foreigners and maybe even set us free.

Completely exhausted, disappointed and discouraged I crouched down in the back of the Landcruiser. Just a couple of hours before the liberation of Kabul we found ourselves as hostages on the way to the most horrific place in Afghanistan! And here we had dreamt of dancing on the streets of Kabul with the other prisoners, celebrating the end of Taliban rule.

Day 103: 13. November 2001

Georg Taubmann: About one o’clock in the morning the convoy turned off the main road into a village. Small mud houses hid behind high walls. “At last a break, we can spend the night in the houses.” I thought. I stretched my legs and prepared to get out.

But no, the jeep rocked across an open field to a rusty battered steel container, the sort of container which is normally used to transport goods on the back of trucks to transatlantic cargo ships. We froze with shock when we saw it.

Panic stricken, some of us protested, "That's impossible, we're not going in there. We'll not survive!"

I tried to persuade the guards, "Please take us into the houses! Don't do this to us! Have you no mercy?"

But they wouldn't relent. I bargained with them to at least leave the door open. Now they gave way, but we didn't trust them. So Heather sat down in the entrance to the container and, despite persuasion and threat, refused to move one centimetre into the container. Inside were some filthy mattresses and ragged blankets. At least we'd have some covering. This night was going to be cold.

The whole scene was completely surreal. At the door Heather engaged in debate with the armed guard so that she wouldn't fall asleep.

"Where can we go to the toilet?" enquired Margrit.

Without a word the guards pointed to the open field. What did it matter to them that the women had to relieve themselves under their curious gaze? It was simply inhuman.

For most of us the night was horrendous and sleep impossible. The temperature fell below zero. The women shivered and moved closer to each other to try and get warm. Peter and I shared one blanket. We all awaited the dawn full of dark premonition.

Margrit Stebner: When I had to enter the container, I was panic stricken. "They'll lock us in and blow us up with a hand grenade!" In order somehow to keep myself calm, at first I stood at the edge of all that was going on and observed the chaos. Heather was debating with some men, Georg – wildly gesticulating - was bargaining with the others. Again I felt panic rising within me: this mixture of helplessness, anger and fear of death is a terrible thing. In spite of everything, within me I heard, as I had

done earlier in the jeep, the calming words, “Margrit, it is ok. You are on the way to freedom!” When I heard that, I was able to lie down in peace beside the other women.

When driving through the outer suburbs of Kabul, one cannot fail to notice the battered steel containers partly riddled with bullets, partly crumpled like balloons. After the Soviet withdrawal the mujahideen during their usurpation of power often drove opponents and civilians into these containers. Shortly before they shut the door, one of them would throw a live hand grenade inside. This metallic evidence of dreadful murders shatters every passer-by who had to experience this period. And some of the Shelter Now staff knew of this savagely brutal Taliban practice.



A shipping container often used during the civil wars as a prison or place of execution

Georg Taubmann: At six o'clock the mullah arrived; he had obviously found a more comfortable place than ours to spend the night in the village. Not a drop of tea, not a morsel of food for us. Instead we were again stuffed into the back of the jeep and off we went. Now Mullah Hassan

Yashim himself drove us. "We must be a very valuable bargaining chip for him," I thought.

"Mullah Hassan, what's going on? Where are you taking us to?" I asked the big chief.

"To Ghazni!" came the brusque reply. "We're taking you to a warm house. You can get warm there, freshen up and have breakfast."

So Mullah Hassan Yashim intended to make a stop there. I knew that Ghazni was his home town and his family lived there.

We were reassured on the one hand by the Mullah's words; on the other we knew we couldn't trust him. We drove into the city and straight towards an ugly building with high walls and barred windows.

"Oh God, please not another prison!" We were all petrified. Fortunately we drove on by; we all breathed a sigh of relief. A stroke of luck! But no, he had only taken the wrong road, he turned round and headed straight into the dark prison entrance. What an emotional roller coaster!

"Mullah," I said, "you promised to take us to a proper house!"

"Get out! And make it quick!" was his response.

Immediately we were surrounded by guards, their Kalashnikovs at the ready. Any resistance was pointless; we had no choice other than to enter this terrible building. Outside we could hear artillery fire.

They locked us into two attached rooms on the first floor. I could scarcely believe my eyes when I saw the toilet: a stinking, blocked up hole in the ground and all around it piles of human excrement. The worst we had ever seen. And we were to stay here?

Again we heard the sound of bombing, so severe that the whole building shook. At this one of our women had a panic attack and ran out into the corridor, where she crouched at the door weeping.

"Get inside!" the guard screamed at her. "You can't stay here!"

In total desperation she pleaded with him, but he showed no mercy. So I tried to persuade him. "Let her sit there. Don't you see that she's terrified? We're not about to run away."

Fortunately I was able to change his mind. However we were all having to combat our sense of panic. We had just escaped the bombing in

Kabul and now the sound of battle in Ghazni, of all places! What was happening? The Northern Alliance with its troops was far away.

Slowly we got accustomed to our new environment. The women began to clear the place and laid mattresses on the floor. We squatted down on the floor and decided at least to eat breakfast. The guards actually brought us naan-bread and green tea. One of us managed to unearth a small piece of cheese. Above all, we were pleased to be all together, unscathed.

Following on from breakfast we thanked God for all his protection and prayed for one another, especially for Margrit who had become very weak because of dysentery, and for me that I would be able to make the right decisions.

While we were still sitting there the shooting started up again in the city, very loud and violent. Then we heard the uproar approaching the prison.

One of us ran to the window and described what they could see. "They're fighting right in front of the prison. Is that the Taliban or not? Now lots of people are running away!"

Suddenly it became deathly quiet. Not a single shot, not a sound could be heard.

It seemed to us like an eternity. But then there was a large crowd of people in front of the prison who were trying to break open the gates. One of us looked out of the window again and shouted, "There's a crowd of people, young people too. They're coming in!"

"The mob will storm the prison and lynch us foreigners," the wild thoughts swirled through my head. I was massively afraid. What I had always dreaded was to be abducted or lynched. I had already observed lynch murders in Pakistan, and I would have much preferred to be shot!

On the ground floor the doors were smashed open. Then they were hammering on the door to our floor till it eventually broke open with a loud crash. Some men stormed towards our cells and ripped the doors open.

And so it happened that suddenly a sweating Afghan was standing in front of us, cartridge belt across his chest, Kalashnikov swinging to and

fro. Totally flabbergasted at seeing foreigners in front of him, he paused. For a long moment we stared at each other speechless, as if paralysed.

Suddenly he shouted, "Assad! Assad! ast! – Freedom! You are free!"

We could hardly believe it. "What? We are free? Are you not the Taliban?"

"No, we've just driven them out. They're over the hills and far away!" was the answer. "Come out! Come out! You are really free!"

More and more men pushed their way into our cell. Then we slowly realised, "Are you Massood's people?" (Ahmed Shah Massood was a highly respected military leader of the Northern Alliance, who had been assassinated on the 9th September.)

"Yes, yes, we are Massood's people!"

Beside myself with happiness and relief I embraced him. Some of the women began to weep. Seconds earlier we had hoped that they wouldn't find us, or if they did, that they would kill us mercifully – and the next moment we were free.

"Now you must get out. Quickly, quickly, now go. You are really free!"

We didn't need to be told twice; we rushed outside. The atmosphere was bristling with tension. The shooting was still going on and a rocket launcher had been set up in front of the prison.

"Quick, in here!"

In order to be shielded from the shooting we had to wait for a while in a small lookout post by the prison wall. Only then were we able to escape into freedom. We ran as fast as we could, totally unprotected, across an open space. Then the first buildings came into view where we were able to find shelter. First we crossed a sort of housing settlement.

When the owners discovered us, they emerged from their houses and stared at us amazed. But we were not alone, one of the fighters led us through the streets. We criss-crossed the streets until a Commander appeared and led us to his office.

The farther we went, the larger the crowd of curious people who accompanied us chatting loudly. "Who are these foreigners? Where do they come from?" No one had known anything about us. Then suddenly

the spell broke! Someone hugged us, numerous people shook our hands, slapping us on the shoulders. The crowd began to cheer. Men took our luggage from us and carried the women's bundles. It was simply indescribable.

Silke Dürrkopf: This march through the street of Ghazni was one of the most wonderful experiences of our whole imprisonment. I had written to my friends back home, "I long that one day I will dance with the Afghans on the streets of Kabul celebrating their liberation from the Taliban." As it hadn't happened there, this was a sort of compensation for me. It was simply wonderful! At that moment I wasn't at all concerned that we were still in danger. One of the Taliban could have removed his turban, mingled among the crowd and shot us dead. I was completely exhausted and yet happy. How thankful I was when a man took my awkward bundle of blankets from me! The atmosphere was like a folk festival!

Margrit Stebner: For me the whole liberation story was like an emotional roller coaster. My feelings peaked and plunged and in between stood on their head. One moment scared to death and then suddenly the giddiness of being set free.

In retrospect I am very grateful that it was Afghans who set us free. That brought me a certain healing: malicious Afghans had imprisoned us, loving Afghans liberated and cheered us.

