

## Afghan teen talks of life

As part of cultural exchange, international students speak at Raleigh schools



Gulam Ali Hesary, 16, an exchange student from Afghanistan, tells Lufkin Road Middle School seventh-graders about life under the Taliban. Attending Sanderson High, he is one of 40 Afghan students spending a year in the United States.

*Staff Photo by Takaaki Iwabu*

By T. KEUNG HUI, Staff Writer

APEX -- The war on terrorism was fought Monday in Afghanistan, Iraq and at Lufkin Road Middle School.

But ideas and facts were used at Lufkin instead of bombs and bullets. As 16-year-old Afghan foreign exchange student Gulam Ali Hesary shared with seventh-graders, the groundwork was laid for better understanding between America and the Muslim world.

"Teens there think they have to have guns," Ali told the students. "They don't think about the future. I'll have a message for them when I return. Other nations are going forward but we're going backward. I want to prepare them to move forward."

Ali is one of 450 students from Islamic nations who are in this country this year as part of the U.S. State Department's Youth Exchange and Study program. The \$10 million YES program was begun as a post-9/11 strategy for combatting terrorism by reaching out to the next generation in Muslim nations.

"The war on terrorism is as much a struggle of ideas and a campaign for the support of publics and governments abroad as it is a military engagement," according to the State Department's Bureau of Cultural and Educational Affairs' Web site.

Ali has been in North Carolina since August, enrolling as a junior at Sanderson High School in North Raleigh. Never having left Afghanistan before, he's been exposed these past three months to new wonders such as co-ed education, McDonald's and football.

He's even learned about bingo, volunteering at a retirement home.

"For a backward kid from Afghanistan, America is a new wonder for me," Ali said.

As part of their YES program obligations, the exchange students are talking about their native countries during this week's International Education Week.

Ali regaled students with stories about life under the Taliban, the Islamic fundamentalist government that oppressed the people and supported terrorists such as Osama bin Laden before the U.S. invaded the country.

His sisters couldn't attend school, and he had to meet dress requirements or face harsh punishments for him and his family.

"The Taliban did what they wanted and not what the people wanted," Ali said. "They were cruel and radical."

But Ali stopped short of telling the students about some of his more graphic experiences living in northern Afghanistan, the area that fought the Taliban and aided the United States during the invasion. He saw friends shot up by Taliban jets and bombs land all around his family's home.

When he returns home in June, Ali plans to complete high school and go on to college to become a doctor or an engineer, two badly needed professions in a rebuilding nation.

"He's very responsible, very mature for his age," said Mirka Christesen, a Lufkin teacher and Ali's local coordinator.

Ali's attempt to dispel American stereotypes of Afghanistan hit home with at least some students.

"It's different from what they say on TV about Afghanistan," said Sean Marusak, 13, a Lufkin seventh-grader. "They say they're all terrorists. But they're not. They're just like us, but with a different culture."

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