

# Zen under fire

BY RACHAEL BRECKON

**ARMED WITH A MASTER'S DEGREE** in law from Waikato University and a passion for Human Rights, Marianne Elliott embarked on a journey that would see her working in some of the most dangerous places in the world.

In 1996, 27-year-old Ms Elliott began what would become a career in international human rights at the Gaza strip. Part of her role was to document events at *flash points*, a place where Palestinians and Israelis meet and conflict can break out. There she would analyse whether the violence, which could be towards children and citizens, was a breach of international human rights law.

After this, she led the creation of the Action Plan for Human Rights in New Zealand and helped the Timor-Leste government launch their human rights strategy. The journey led her to Herat, Afghanistan in 2006 and 2007.

This station as a human rights officer for the United Nations assistance

mission to Afghanistan is the main subject of her memoir *Zen under Fire*.

Ms Elliott illustrates the personal, philosophical and political difficulties in trying to uphold international human rights in a war zone through documenting her journey in one of the world's most notorious war zones.

Her book humanises the complexities of the Afghanistan struggle and New Zealand's role in international human rights.

New Zealand does have more influence than you would expect for its size, due to a record of being "good international citizens", and it is important for Afghanistan that New Zealand does not give up on it, Ms Elliot explains.

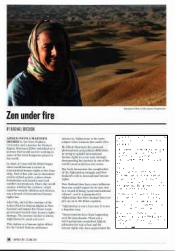
"Afghanistan is not a lost case. It is not a hopeless case.

"Improvements have been happening over the past decade. There are a lot of passionate committed Afghan advocates for rule of law and for human rights who have appreciated the



Marianne Elliott in hills above Cheqcharan





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support of the international community and who are hoping that it won't be withdrawn.


"I feel like if you just read the news, the mainstream news, it would be really easy to think: 'my god that country is just a basket case and it's all over really'.

"There is a lot more going on in Afghanistan than just the fighting. There has been a lot of reconstruction happening and a lot of work put into the justice sector and there are some really amazing advocates for women's rights and for human rights.

"[In the book] I talked about these women who have really stepped up and they have put themselves at considerable risk to make the changes they really want to see happen."

When asked what she would like lawyers to take out of it, Ms Elliott's goal appears relatively simple: "It might just be it makes them a little more interested." 



 Giving Afghan lawyers, police officers and people a face and name (even if it had to be changed for their personal safety) and consequently challenging stereotypes of Afghan people is "very, very central" to *Zen under Fire*.

"If that in itself is all I achieved with the book, I would be really happy," she says. <sup>LT</sup>