



## The Sweetest Embrace: Return to Afghanistan

Director: Najeeb Mirza, Canada, 2008, 74 minutes

*The only thing I want God to bestow on me is to sit by my parents and smell their scent. – Amir*

Soorgul was only ten years old when he said goodbye to his family in the mountains of northeastern Afghanistan. Crossing into Soviet Tajikistan over the turbulent Amu Darya River, he clutched the sides of a wooden gondola as it slowly made its way to the other side. He was supposed to spend a year studying in Tajikistan, but it would take sixteen years and a journey to Canada before he could return to his village.

Soorgul was one of many Afghan children sent to Tajikistan during the Soviet occupation. When the Soviet Union collapsed, civil war broke out on both sides of the border and the children were left stranded. He and a few of his schoolmates were able to leave Tajikistan only after many years, when Canada accepted them as refugees.

In *The Sweetest Embrace*, Soorgul and Amir, two of these forgotten boys of Afghanistan, return to their country in search of their families. We meet Soorgul and Amir in Kabul and join them as they travel north, towards the villages where they last saw their families. After an American military accident leads to riots, it becomes too dangerous to continue in NGO vehicles. They switch to local vans and finally, when rock-strewn roads become completely impassable, finish their journey on foot through some of Afghanistan's highest mountains. But when their paths diverge, their futures become filled with unexpected and unpredictable turns as they seek resolution in their lives.

*The Sweetest Embrace* tells an intimate story set against one of the world's most harsh yet beautiful landscapes, in a land where life has been shaped by war and hardship but where spirit remains resilient.

### DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Najeeb Mirza is a documentary filmmaker with years of experience in international development. Born in Pakistan, Mirza moved with his family to Canada when he was a young boy, and grew up in Edmonton. His work with the Canadian International Development Agency as senior project officer for Central Asia led him to the position of Head of Aid at the Canadian Embassy in Kazakhstan, managing CIDA programs in Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. During years of personal and professional travel, Mirza carried a camera to document some of the extraordinary people and places he visited.

The origins of *The Sweetest Embrace: Return to Afghanistan* — Mirza's first feature-length documentary — began during the making of an earlier project when he hired Soorgul, one of the "forgotten boys" of Afghanistan, as a translator.

Mirza currently lives in Ottawa, where he is a senior development officer with CIDA's Afghanistan program.