

Asian diary BY ARJUNA

A Culture Lost

THE war that ravaged Afghanistan has not only spawned anarchy and a massive attack on its cultural heritage. It has also reduced Kabul to a city of the dead, the maimed and the desperate.

According to art historian Ram Dhamija, who recently visited Afghanistan, rival armed guerrillas sweep through different parts of this ancient beautiful city like tidal waves wreaking destruction and looting whatever they can.

Historians say that Kabul has a rich heritage dating back to 2,000 years. But the cruel conflict that is going on has resulted in the destruction and looting of the National Museum of Afghanistan.

Somehow, it managed to survive the first 10 years of the civil war and the Russian intervention, but had to close down after the Russians withdrew.

One man who laments the destruction of Afghan heritage is the curator of the museum, Dr Najibullah Popal, who has managed the institution for about 18 years now.

In a voice choked with emotion, he says: "Future generations will never forgive us for this vandalism. We will have no history left if this fight goes on."

Dr Popal estimates that many of Afghanistan's archaeological and historical sites and monuments have been destroyed or damaged.

First to fall was the museum. It was totally destroyed in the first two weeks of fighting. Most of its rare archaeological collections were looted.

One estimate is that thousands of artefacts and objects recovered from ancient Kushana sites, which belong

to the period 1300-1000 BC, were stolen or smuggled out of the country.

These objects ranged from sculptures, wall paintings, objects daily use, jewellery and coins to furniture from sites including Bamyan, Haddah and Begran.

The museum had a rich collection of early Islamic art in Afghanistan and central Asia, apart from items which gave clues to the cultural intermingling of Romans, Indians, Central Asians and Chinese cultural strains over a period of a thousand years.

According to Dhamija, the greatest loss is the disappearance of the museum's collection of Begram ivory, which goes back to roughly the second and third centuries AD.

According to several analysts here, it will be interesting for any human agency to find out where the art treasure might have gone. One story is that the Russians have taken away all the art treasures for their own museums in Moscow or Leningrad. But nothing of this loot has ever been returned to Kabul.

Another theory is that the French had taken the collections to their own museums in Paris to save them from the vendors.

A more reliable theory is that Mujahideen warriors carried away the art treasure to sell to their American patrons.

US museums and art galleries are known to be hungry for Oriental art. Smugglers have been active in the past 50 years chipping away ancient temples in India and elsewhere for rare art treasures.

Asia's cultural heritage has been systematically robbed by wealthy European and American collectors. This is the belief of Oriental art historians.

So far, no one has come forward to claim possession of these artefacts. And no one knows really where the treasures have gone.

The tragic fact remains that most of the collections got destroyed in the street fighting an aerial bombing.

India has a deep interest in the cultural traditions of Afghanistan. The history and culture of the two countries have been linked for centuries and Afghan paintings, sculptures and music have all been linked with Indian traditions.

The Begram ivories collections was found by a French archaeological mission piled up in two rooms carefully walled up in the ruined Begram Palace of the Kushana kings. (Begram was the summer capital of the Kushanas.)

One guess is that the reason for hiding this hoard was to protect it against theft, possibly during the invasion of Shapur from Sassanian Iran.

A number of these beautifully carved ivory pieces were part of royal harem furniture as decorative plaques on back-rest frames or were used as places on toilet boxes to decorate the sides and the lids.

The motifs carved on plaques included women in different poses, animals, birds, lotuses, life-tree motifs, griffins, gods and goddesses.

The furniture pieces with delicately-carved figures are remarkable like the stone carvings of the Toranas of the Sanchi stupa (first and second centuries AD), some coming closer to Amravati sculpture which is a century or two later than Sanchi.

The virtual destruction of an ancient city and the vandalism of such rare collections of archaeological and historical treasures, which has a bearing on the historical development of this entire region of Central Asia, Iran, Western China, Rome, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, is tragic.

Equally distressing is the almost complete lack of interest and concern of Indian cultural historians, academics and the cultural elite. UNESCO, too, seems to have forgotten to notice this tragedy.

The least one would have expected from UNESCO was the institution of a high-powered UNESCO mission to monitor the loss.

It could, at least, underline the deprivation future generations are going to face, including losing an interesting segment of the world's cultural history. Such standing missions could be brought into play in other regions of conflicts, such as Cambodia, Serbia and Iraq.

— Depthnews Asia

47th Emmy Awards

Continued on page 9
Walston told the Pasadena Civic Auditorium audience.

"The Tonight Show With Jay Leno" won its first Emmy for best variety, music or

comedy series. The show had been nominated seven times over the past three years.



Actress-singer Barbra Streisand holds up her Emmy awards for Outstanding Individual Achievement in Directing in a Variety or Music Programme for "Barbra Streisand The Concert" at the 47th Annual Primetime Emmy Awards September 10 in Pasadena, CA. — AFP photo

"As my dad would say, 'fight the good fight,'" Leno said.

HBO's "Barbra Streisand: The Concert" won best individual performance in a variety or music programme and best variety, music or comedy special. The star and co-producer noted it had been 30 years since her last Emmy.

The late Raul Julia took the Emmy for lead actor in a miniseries or special for portraying rain forest activist Chico Mendes in "The Burning Season."

"I hope that you will always keep him in your heart as I will always keep him in my heart," said his widow, Merel Poloway Julia. Glen Close won the miniseries actress award for "Serving in Silence: The Margarette Cammermeyer Story," which depicted the dismissal of a military officer for homosexuality.

In a tie, Judy Davis of "Serving in Silence" and Shirley Knight in "Indictment: The McMartin Trial" shared the award for supporting actress in a miniseries. Donald Sutherland won supporting miniseries actor for "Citizen X." "Indictment" also won best made-for-TV movie.

Reeling Documentary Makers

Almost half a century old, the Vietnam Documentary Film Studio tries hard to keep cameras grinding Andrew Nette reports for Inter Press Service from Hanoi

HE has captured much of Vietnam's modern history on film, but changes are Pham Ngoc Quynh will be recording only a little of the Indochinese

country's emergence from international isolation.

As communist Vietnam rejoins the rest of the world with its market reforms and reestablishment of diplo-

matic ties with former enemies, documentary film makers like Quynh can only sigh and wish for the 'good old days'.

"In some ways, making documentaries now is even more difficult than in the old days," he says. "Then films were popular and the government supplied us with whatever we wanted. Now it is all market-oriented, costs have risen and even a basic budget is hard to get."

To be sure, Hanoi's Vietnam Documentary Film Studio, of which Quynh is a veteran, remains the largest film outfit in the country. But while it used to shoot at least 50 projects a year as late as the 1980s, the studio now has difficulty cranking out even ten annually.

Studio Director Ma Van Cuong says this is sad because the cinema industry in Vietnam originated from documentary film making. The Studio's supporters also point out that while many of its products were used for propaganda purposes by the state, a great number of these were also undeniably of stellar quality.

Film director-producer Quynh, whose career has seen Vietnam struggle against French and US domination as well as the success and failures of the country's postwar reconstruction, cites two he took part in that he is still particularly proud of.

One is his 1966 work, *On the Wind and the Waves*, that documented the efforts of remote island inhabitants off the Vietnamese coast to alert mainland forces to approaching US bombers. The other is *Vinh Linh: Steel Ramparts*, possibly Quynh's best-known film.

Lying on Vietnam's 17th parallel, the former demarcation between North and South Vietnam, Vinh Linh district was the scene of one of the fiercest battles of the country's decades-long war. For more than 1,000 days between 1966 to 1969, the US military rained more than half a million tonnes of bombs on the area in an attempt to destroy a vital North Vietnamese stronghold.

In March 1967, an eight-member Studio team headed by Quynh went to Vinh Linh to make a documentary based on the battle. They spent 18 months filming in the area. But on their way back to the northern capital in April 1968, the team came under attack from B-52 bombers. Three crew members were killed, and all their work — over 5,000 metres of film — was completely incinerated.

Quynh holds up old black-and-white photographs that show the destruction wrought by the war, as well as the extraordinary risks taken by the film crew. "In order to show the real conditions of war, our job was to go to the most severe areas of fighting," he recalls. "So when we suggested making the film, I did not appoint any specific people to come with me. They were all volunteers."

Although they were devastated by the deaths, Quynh says they became even more determined to finish the film. "If for no other reason than to express our solidarity

with those on the crew who had sacrificed their lives."

Four members of the original group set out again for a reshoot. *Steel Ramparts* was finally completed in 1969 and went on to win a number of prizes, including a gold medal at the 1971 Moscow International Film Festival.

The film's portrayal of life in a mainly peasant army on the receiving end of the full force of one of technology-culturally sophisticated military machines in the world, made it of immense propaganda value to the North Vietnam cause.

But the depiction of daily life during the conflict makes *Steel Ramparts* a powerful anti-war film, even today. Indeed, the film not only captures scenes of women cultivating rice paddies under the ever-present threat of bombing raids, but also of life in the underground caves — many up to six metres deep — where children were born and taught lessons by torchlight.

Explains Quynh: "At that time, the severity of the bombing over Vinh Linh was so bad, not a single house was left standing and everyone had to live in caves to survive."

Unfortunately, *Steel Ramparts* was not the only one of the studio's projects to claim lives. Quynh says of the studio's total staff 300, about 136 died during the various conflicts in Indochina.

After reunification in 1975, the Studio continued to make documentaries on the country's reconstruction and its cameramen recorded Vietnam's ten-year occupation of Cambodia and its brief, but bloody border war with China in 1979.

Cuong, who was injured in the same bombing raid that claimed the lives of three of the *Steel Ramparts* crew, estimates that the Studio has shot more than 10 million metres of film since its inauguration in 1949 by the late President Ho Chi Minh.

These days, though, shrinking state subsidies have forced the Studio to cut down the number of its projects and busy itself with money-making activities like supplying footage to foreign journalists for US seven dollars a metre.

Cuong says the main problem now is preserving works presently stored in the archives — more than 1,500 released films and three million metres of unedited film. "While the technology to preserve this material exists, we don't have the money to afford it," he adds, listing must-have like airconditioners, dehumidifiers and plastic boxes for film storage. "As a precaution we should make copies of all the film, but don't have the finances to do this either."

Reels and reels lie in rusted canisters that are stacked from floor to ceiling in the Studio's four-room building. Cuong says they have had to throw away at least four boxes of film each year.

He observes: "These films are national assets. We need to preserve them as best as we can, but if we don't act soon much of it will be destroyed."

The Post Digs Itself into Deep Trouble

Mike Hall writes from Lusaka

A controversial, campaigning Zambian newspaper is celebrating its fourth birthday in the face of a bundle of writs and government hostility. A former editor looks at *The Post's* difficult childhood, which illustrates some of the problems faced by the media in newly democratic countries.



POLICE officers have become regular visitors to the offices of Zambia's bi-weekly newspaper *The Post*, says managing director Fred M'embe.

In the past, when asked to accompany them to headquarters, M'embe always refused saying: "If you need me at the police station then arrest me."

In June they did. M'embe and editor-in-chief Matsautso Phiri were charged with criminal libel for a story alleging the Zambian President Frederick Chiluba had a child by a Zairean mistress.

This is not the first time the paper that digs deeper has raised the ire of politicians.

In 1991, the lead story in the very first edition of the paper — then called *The Weekly Post* reported that top officials in the state-run copper mining and marketing enterprises were siphoning off millions of dollars from Zambia's copper sales in league with foreign businessmen.

Within three hours the entire print run of 30,000 was sold out. *The Post's* first libel writ soon arrived.

The paper symbolised the heady political change which was overtaking the country and was seen as a promise of better things to come. It offered a lively mix of divergent political views and satire and took a delight in exposing abuses of high office.

an accountant and former student activist from an influential political family, journalist John Mukela Phiri, and myself — believed a campaigning independent newspaper was needed because the time had come for a more open society. But few believed the government would allow a critical newspaper.

At the time, Kenneth Kaunda's government was under pressure to abandon the one-party state from a loose coalition of dissident politicians and businessmen, led by trade unionist Chiluba under the banner of the

Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD).

Kaunda's self-preservation appeared to rule out dissent. Zambia's two dailies and the sole distribution company had been owned and controlled by the government for more than 20 years. And with 80 per cent of the economy in the hands of the state, there was little chance of *The Post* netting any advertising.

Nevertheless, foreign aid was ruled out and in early 1991 the paper's founders handpicked a consortium of 20 prominent local share-

holders to put up the equivalent of \$60,000 to launch the paper and resist any attempts to close it.

About a year after Chiluba and the MMD came to power in 1991, hopes for greater political change and prosperity began to fade. Inflation and job losses mounted. Corruption again raised its head.

Since then, *The Post* has published expose after expose and now has at least 30 civil and criminal libel actions on its books, most initiated by Cabinet members and senior government officials. Chiluba himself has

missed few opportunities to condemn *The Post*. His complaint about the story alleging he had a child with a Zairean mistress is the paper's eleventh charge of criminal libel.

Many see this as an attempt by an increasingly unpopular government to scare the press off stories that can further damage its image in the run-up to presidential and parliamentary elections next year. There is also ministerial talk of bringing in stricter press controls.

Legal action is costly, but a bigger threat to the paper's financial security is the faltering economy.

It's All about Dreams and Destiny

Continued from page 10

and out of the emerald green ocean. Sicilia's constant burbling was like a cooled hand on a fevered brow. She boarded me in a hospital. I nagged her not to leave me there alone. She assured that she won't and promised to visit me whenever she'd got time. Her words were as good as her deeds. I didn't want to spend time staring at the sick white walls. I told Sicilia to get me some colours so that I could keep busy mixing them.

As long as I could keep my head up I went on stroking with the brush. Sicilia would draw a crowd at the foot of my bed before I could get half way through. She talked the hospital super into arranging a painting show of mine and went on with the inauguration. On the opening day her eyes brimmed with tears as she told me how proud it'd made her of me. I took my release and moved in with Sicilia at her workplace.

Her foremost task was to have me rehabilitated as fast as possible; her concern was she'd be bundled back home if her consulate office found out her missionary activities with me but her biggest worry was that she was slowly losing her mind. Anyway she didn't forget to inquire of my well being at the end of the day, spoon in some more milk in my cup that cheers in the evening and turn me in early.

One morning Sicilia woke me up and said

that we were going to a site of inspection that couldn't wait. Surprisingly she'd got the hang of things around, the mantra of working with the most difficult kind of people on earth was finally hers. She was dressing everybody down on her third word and nobody dared show lax. When we were passing by a thin woodland on way back, evening got the better part of us.

Sicilia: Hmm... I think the time has arrived. For what? For the chick to fly away. Yes, I know, don't forget to take the vitamins dear.

She tried to be funny but the jeep was coming to a stop. She looked straight, tapped her fingers on the steering and sullenly looked at the swarthy clump of trees. I touched her caring fingers knowing what mistakes we were capable making of and how far we were prepared to go. Because if we didn't distance each other then, we'd both find it impossible later when painfully it had to be done.

One morning I wended back home. Two letters were awaiting me, one was official, which I didn't have to open and the other one came from Neela with no one addressed to.

So many times had I called up those fateful six digits and so many many times had those irritant buzzes ringed back in my ears that in this small life of mine I have taken a vow bigger than anything you can imagine — I'll forget you, forget you, forget you. I went

to Madison tower to clear my paycheck. Susana came over as soon as she saw me with a measure of confusion on her face. How are you, Susana. I'm fine but what's wrong with you, you look you haven't slept for days? What possibly could get wrong? You're giving up the job, aren't you? There are inexplicable reasons beyond those that I've put in the resignation letter, the difference is to many they don't sound real enough to chuck up job but it's alright, Susana, if we don't rhyme or reason all the time.

I left Susana standing like a mannikin, frozen and poised around a stream of corporate red tie bubbleheads on the twelfth floor of the Madison tower in the St Crescent boulevard where I'd learnt my first lesson you can't come down by an up-escalator. After returning home I applied to a multinational company who were looking for a man with a winning edge. All I had to do was to give my resume the kind of edge they were looking for and put on a winning smile. It didn't go as smooth as it does on TV Ads but I fooled them. I was told to do a short course on personal management at their expense and was transferred to a place where I'd started my pilgrimage.

On my first day at Ringgit I drove at my temple of the sacred heart, the pink baroque house guarded by a wall of coconut trees where someone walks like a cat when the