

AFGHANISTAN

Tanking history

M ABDUL HAFIZ

STEPPED in remoteness and characterised by unpredictability, isolation and irrelevance the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan hit the news headlines early this month with another oddity its onslaught against the country's archaeological treasures and cultural heritage. Afghanistan happens to be home to an array of pre-Islamic historian treasures from its days as a key stop on the ancient silk route and a strategic corridor for conquerors dating back Alexander the Great. An Afghan edict announced late last month by Taliban's supreme Leader Mullah Muhammad Umar, calling for the destruction of all statues in line with 'Islamic' laws caused shock around the world. Before an effective reaction could buildup the Taliban began blasting all statues from Afghanistan's rich cultural past including the two massive Buddhas one of them at 53m believed to be the world's tallest hewn out of sandstone mountains in Bamiyan province.

Amidst protests and condemnations pouring in from all over the world a reticent Taliban Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakel told the baffled reporters that Taliban supreme leader Mullah Umar's decision to destroy pre-Islamic statues in Afghanistan was 'irreversible'.

In the past Mullah Umar wanted non-Islamic artefacts to be protected for reasons unknown. Now he asserts that the breaking of statues is an Islamic order and he gave the decision to break them in the light of a fatwa of the Ulama and the supreme court of Afghanistan. Many Afghans are non-plussed at the supreme leader's change of heart and do not share Taliban's view of what should be done with pre-Islamic statues and artefacts. For example, Hamid Karazi, a deputy foreign minister of ousted Rabbani government argues that the statues are no longer a part of the religion but a part of the country's history as the Pharaohs' tombs are in Egypt. According to him Afghanistan has been a staunch Muslim country for 1200 years and the Mullahs never tried to destroy the statues.

While the rest of the world views the Taliban actions as sacrilege and the destruction of Buddhas in Bamiyan an insult to Buddhism, the Taliban militia chief engaged in the mashing of the statues shrugged off international

condemnation saying "all we are breaking are stones". Even as the pressures mounted on Taliban authority urging it to stop the destruction and rethink their decision, the Taliban leadership remained unyielding. With his characteristic nonchalance the Taliban foreign minister explained that the Taliban are not destroying the statues to confront the world or anger the

As the controversy as to the rightness or wrongness of the Taliban action would continue to rage indefinitely, true to their reputation Afghanistan's ruling Taliban have been able to spring a sensation on the global scene and earned renewed hostility, just when it appeared that they had scored a major moral and diplomatic success by strictly implementing a ban on poppy cultivation.

international community. "We have our own internal issues and laws, according to which we are acting" he said.

The UN Secretary General Kofi Annan criticised the Taliban move to destroy statues in Afghanistan and appealed to Taliban leadership to abide by their previous commitment to protect Afghanistan's cultural heritage in general and the two great Buddhist sculptures in Bamiyan in particular. The UNESCO Director General Koichiro Matsuura said that the authors of the edict calling for the destruction of statues carried a terrible responsibility before the history. Matsuura is particularly worried that the Taliban are destroying which the entire world considers to be masterpieces.

The US is distressed by the Taliban edict and considers it to be in direct contravention of one of the Islam's basic tenets the tolerance for other religions. Russia denounced the Taliban step as vandalism. Germany is appalled by the wilful destruction of cultural artefacts in Afghanistan. The

EU strongly urges Taliban authority not to implement the tragic decision. India has been most strident in decrying Taliban steps and its rightwing Hindu nationalist groups threatened to respond with their own brand of violence at home. Pakistan, one of the countries that recognise Taliban regime, has also condemned.

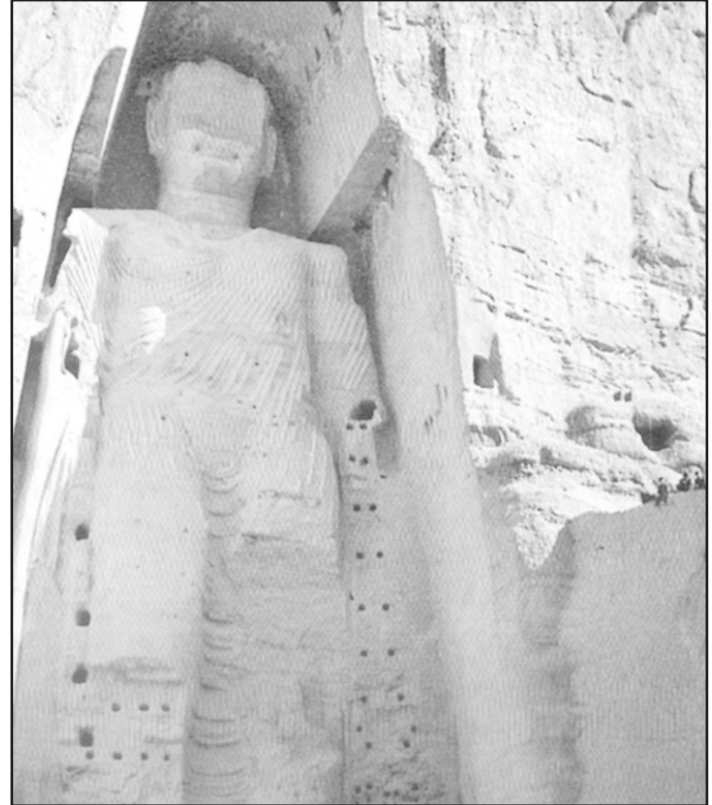
International outcry over the Taliban's plan to destroy all statues being un-Islamic has failed to sway the Afghan leadership from its mission. The Taliban rejected a last-minute UN appeal when its Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakel told UN special envoy for Afghanistan Francesco Vendrell that would complete the destruction of the statues the militia regards as un-Islamic. He again emphasised that "the abandoned relics are not our pride" even if they are to others. He assured that the destruction of them would not mean that the freedom of the minorities would cease. Referring to the concerns of the Buddhist countries, in particular, the minister said, "If the world has concerns, we are ready to listen to them and we will tell them of our explanations if they want to listen. It is their right to be convinced or not to be convinced."

Equally curt was the comment of a senior Taliban spokesman who argued that Islamic teaching rather than the concerns of other nations and people guided the Taliban regime's policies.

As the controversy as to the rightness or wrongness of the Taliban action would continue to rage indefinitely, true to their reputation Afghanistan's ruling Taliban have been able to spring a sensation on the global scene and earned renewed hostility. Just when it appeared that they had scored a major moral and diplomatic success by strictly implementing a ban on poppy cultivation. All the good works done by them by ensuring that no opium was cultivated in a country that had become the world's largest opium producer seem to have been neutralised because the focus of attention has now shifted to the fate of Afghan statues.

It is tragic that the concerns for Afghanistan's drought and famine as well as human sufferings are, at the moment, overshadowed by international outcry to save the statues of Afghanistan.

Hafiz is former DG, BISS.



Who's afraid of Taliban, anyway?

INDONESIA

Turmoil in Aceh

A.S.M. NURUNNABI

INDONESIAN President Abdurrahman Wahid has not succeeded in calming the turmoil rolling Indonesia's outlying regions, including Aceh. A technical ceasefire has been in force in Aceh but it was a mockery to begin with. Since the truce was renewed last month, sporadic clashes occurred between the military and separatists of the Free Aceh Movement. Each side killed, abducted and tortured those perceived to be collaborators for the other.

Despite the 10-month-old ceasefire and peace talks that have shown a spattering promise, Aceh is once again said to be a place for fighting words. Early in March, rebel threats forced American oil giant Exxon-Mobil to close down its vast natural-gas fields in the province. Jakarta responded by formally branding the Free Aceh Movement (known by its Indonesian acronym, GAM) as "separatists" and dispatching elite combat troops to the region. Both sides seemed to welcome the conflict: the military, which has seen its role and reputation diminished by fiascoes in East Timor, Borneo, and the Moluccas, is anxious to reassert its power. GAM, on its part, thrives on chaos.

This kind of rhetoric is familiar from decades of conflict in Aceh. What's different this time is the closure of the Exxon-Mobil fields, which produce all of the province's gas. Company representatives say they cannot calculate how much money they were losing each day. But Jakarta normally received \$100 million per month in taxes and revenues from the plant, and the shutdown has disrupted operations at the state-owned refinery that processed and shipped the gas to countries like Japan and South Korea.

For many Acehnese, the massive Exxon-Mobil served as an unshakeable symbol of Javanese imperialism: nearly all of its products and profits left Aceh. Moreover the company reportedly paid Indonesian military \$500,000 a month to protect its facilities.

By choosing the second option, Exxon-Mobil sent shock waves through the Indonesian economy. After the company evacuated 120 staff members, including 20 Americans, the Indonesian stock market fell 17 per cent in two days. The sudden closure spooked foreign investors and budget analysts, who worried about the lost revenue and prompted several other gas-related companies to halt operations as well.

The shutdown, which Exxon-Mobil said was indefinite, would also

hurt Aceh. Thousands of workers already lost their jobs. So far, the Acehnese don't seem to blame GAM.

But what may prove most dangerous is that the shutdown gives the military, which has eased its repression somewhat in Aceh in the past year, an excuse to return wearing jackboots. Within hours of ExxonMobil's announcement, the Army claimed a broader role in the fight against GAM. Since the fall of Suharto, the military has had to relinquish much of its political role and hand over many into internal security matters to the police. But trouble spots like Aceh still give the army a taste of the omnipotence it once enjoyed across the country. Over the past two months, more Jeeps, trucks and armoured personnel carriers were sent to the province. Lately, Jakarta dispatched three battalions of combat troops to the ExxonMobil plant site to launch "limited security operations" against the rebel. All told, there are reportedly 36,000 army and police troops in the province now compared with about 5,000 rebels.

In fact, the eagerness with which the army greeted the new assignment is leading many to wonder if the military may welcome the turmoil. With Indonesian President Wahid crippled by corruption allegations and daily protest against his rule, generals may see an opportunity to reassert a greater influence within the political arena, particularly given close ties between the military and the heir apparent Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri.

According to one western political analyst, Indonesian military officials have been discussing for weeks a scenario in which ExxonMobil's departure would force other companies to shut down, creating a domino effect that would bring Aceh's economy to its knees. With unemployment rampant and the blame for ExxonMobil's closure resting on GAM, the theory goes, the guerillas and their quest for independence would quickly lose any sympathy they might have earned.

In Aceh, the fear is already palpable. This year more than 200 people have been killed in the province. Lately, after GAM rebels occupied the town of Idi Cut in east Aceh, the Army stormed in and burned down 1,800 homes and stores, turning 8000 Acehnese into instant refugees."

According to a commentator, if the renewed battle in Aceh serves anyone, it's certainly not the people of the province.

Nurunnabi is former official, Government of Bangladesh.

CHINA

The next long march

ALEJANDRO REYES

AS he walks down an alleyway in his new Xintiandi development a cluster of restored 19th-century Shanghai courtyard houses Vincent Lo Hong-sui braces against the chill of an early spring wind, draping a black coat like a cape over the shoulders of his gray, Chinese-style jacket. Though he has an appointment to keep, the 52-year-old Hong Kong tycoon wants to show off his \$150 million project, which he hopes will become Shanghai's signature entertainment precinct on par with Hong Kong's Lan Kwai Fong or London's Covent Garden. Xintiandi (meaning "new heaven and earth") is the first phase of a \$3.5 billion, 50-hectare mega-project that will include hotels, apartment blocks and office buildings amassed around a man-made lake. While Xintiandi's official launch won't take place until late this year, a handful of restaurants and bars is already operating. Starbucks just opened its 10th outlet in the city, in an airy corner pavilion. Says Lo: "Shanghai is big and important enough an international city to have such a center for food and leisure."

It's been a long and tough road for Lo since he first invested in a high-rise hotel venture in Shanghai 16 years ago. Now almost half the assets of his company, Shui On, are located in the city, and Lo spends a quarter of his time there. Winning government approval for Xintiandi was particularly tricky. The site encompasses the building where the first Chinese Communist Party congress was held nearly 80 years ago hallowed ground in China. "If our concept hadn't been acceptable to conservative party members, we would have been in trouble," explains Lo. Then Shui On had to put up all the money on its own after bankers balked, fearing the expensive, low-rise project wouldn't be profitable. Later, when the cost of the restoration ballooned, Lo managed to coax \$45 million from four banks.

All the hurdles and huge risks are worth it, Lo insists particularly now that China is expected to join the World Trade Organization. Accession means major new opportunities for Shanghai and for Lo. "A lot of multinationals want to make Shanghai their mainland headquarters and that's good for my business," he says. Membership in the world trading system is China's ticket to board the globalization train. There is no question that

after Beijing joins the WTO if it sticks to its program of phased-in commitments Chinese society will undergo deep changes. Companies will be forced to get in shape and adopt international standards of governance or lose out to rivals that do. The goal: to create a globally competitive economy.

As China's post-WTO aspirations play out, it is likely to be in the port city of Shanghai where the results will first become evident. Long regarded as China's doorway to the world, Shanghai in recent years has become a showcase of the country's economic and social future, ground zero in the struggle to build a modern, open society. The city's pride of place has been secured by the patronage of top Chinese leaders, including President Jiang Zemin and Premier Zhu Rongji who both previously ran the city before heading for Beijing.

Shanghai is on the frontlines of China's business revolution. Multinationals are moving in and local entrepreneurs are forging more efficient ways. It's a painful transition. Across China, workers by the millions are being laid off with no social safety net to support them. Some 12 million people a year are losing their jobs, with only about half finding new ones. Reforms could one day erode China's one-party domination and the corrupt state apparatus. But Shanghai's leaders are concerned with more practical matters. "Our government has still not totally extricated itself from the activities of enterprises," Shanghai Mayor Xu Kuangdi complained to deputies at the recently concluded session of the National People's Congress, China's legislature.

The Chinese leadership is gambling that WTO accession will deliver a critical boost at this stage of the country's economic restructuring. Anticipation of China's joining the WTO has already led to a new wave of overseas capital inflows, particularly into sectors such as telecoms and retail. China is the second-largest destination for foreign direct investment behind the U.S., accounting for 61% of the money pouring into Asia. Fred Hu, a Goldman Sachs economist in Hong Kong, estimates that by 2005, China's annual external trade will double to \$600 billion while direct investments could top \$100 billion. Shanghai is already luring the talented and adventurous. Venture capitalist Chen Baowen is among the many young Chinese who have

decided to come back after being educated in the West. She left Shanghai for the U.S. when she was 18. Now 33, she is president and chairman of China Technology Ventures, which last year shifted its main office to Shanghai from New York, launching a wholly owned foreign enterprise to both invest in and advise technology firms. For months Chen has been living in the luxury Grand Hyatt Hotel, preferring it to her parents' home across the river because her office is in the same building. "China was literally changing before my eyes and this was not just the skyscrapers going up in Pudong," says Chen. "The Internet industry was on the verge of an explosion." Leveraging her family's business contacts, Chen hopes to get in on the ground floor of Shanghai's high-tech expansion. The city, too, has become a favorite destination for Hong Kongers craving a fun weekend break shopping along Nanjing Road; dinner at M on the Bund; and drinks atop the Jin Mao Tower, the third-tallest building in the world. Some regulars are deciding to stay longer. In February, American entrepreneur James Kralik decamped from Hong Kong, where he had been living for 10 years, and moved into a spacious apartment in downtown Shanghai. He and his Chinese wife wanted a better environment for their two sons to grow up in and to give them a Mandarin-language education. "We moved really because of the kids," Kralik says.

The 28-year-old Shanghai native is something of an icon for the new China. A manager for a major Hong Kong property company with three projects in Shanghai, the sharply dressed executive is the sort of go-getter that made the former British colony famous. After getting an MBA at Fudan University, his salary doubled, enabling him to afford rent on an apartment and the monthly payment for a mortgage on a two-bedroom unit in a residential development now under construction. He's already calculating how to trade up to better digs and arrange a stint in the U.S. to improve his educational qualifications and earning potential. Zhang's parents could never afford to have such hopes. But in the new Shanghai and the new China young people are making ambitious plans. And for the first time, those dreams have more than a chance of coming true.

Courtesy: Asiaweek