

Horror in Afghanistan

The threat of war is making a hungry, violent and miserable country even worse...

FOR the estimated 5m Afghans who subsist on foreign aid, their rulers' quarrel with their country's largest donor America could not have come at a worse time. With war generally assumed to be imminent, foreign aid workers have fled. Millions are on the brink of starvation, but food aid all but ceased to enter the country after September 11th, and is only now starting to trickle back in. The Taliban, Afghanistan's ruling group of Islamic fundamentalists, have seized aid agencies' stocks of grain and imposed tight controls on their activities. One and a half million refugees are expected to surge into neighbouring countries, and the United Nations secretary-



general Kofi Annan is pleading with governments not to turn them back. The UN estimated on September 26th that as winter approaches, the number of Afghans needing aid would increase to 7.5m. Six UN agencies with operations in Afghanistan have issued a warning that "a humanitarian crisis of stunning proportions is unfolding".

The threat of war has aggravated an already awful predicament. A drought starting last year wiped out two-thirds of the wheat crop in northern Afghanistan and three-quarters of the livestock, causing 500,000 people to abandon their homes in search of food. A survey conducted several months ago found that half of the children in Afghanistan were chronically malnourished, and a fifth severely so.

In the past two weeks, the fear of American bombs has prompted many more city-dwellers to flee to the countryside or towards the nearest border. In preparation for the expected invasion, Taliban press gangs have broken into thousands of homes at night and conscripted at Kalashnikov-point any young men foolish or unlucky enough still to be there.

The recent drought would not have been so deadly if Afghanistan had been peaceful and well governed. Unfortunately, it is neither. With occa-

sional lulls, the country has been embroiled in various civil wars for longer than most of its 23m people can remember. Since 1973, 1m Afghans have died violently, some while fighting invaders from the Soviet Union, some while fighting other Afghans, the remainder during massacres of civilians. Perhaps 6m landmines lurk beneath Afghan soil. In the past decade, roughly 70,000 people have stepped on them while herding goats or fleeing for neighbouring countries, mainly Pakistan and Iran, where 3.5m Afghans have sought refuge.

Afghanistan was badly and brutally governed by Soviet puppets in the



1980s and early 1990s. Since 1996, when the Taliban completed their seizure of power, life for most Afghans has grown worse. Many welcomed the Taliban (literally: "religious students") when they marched on the capital, Kabul, promising to restore order to a land wracked by banditry. But the Taliban's idea of order involved punishments of mediaeval severity for anything they saw as unIslamic. Men who shave are whipped. Women who fail to cover every inch of flesh are beaten. Thieves have their hands or feet cut off. Fornicators are stoned to death. Taliban theorists have debated whether the proper punishment for homosexuals is to bulldoze a wall over them or to bury them alive. Non-Muslims must wear yellow patches to help the faithful avoid them. Muslims who fail to attend mosque regularly risk arrest.

The Taliban persecute not only those who do not share their extreme interpretation of Islam, but also those from different tribes. Most Taliban are Pathans, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. Non-Pathan travellers at Taliban roadblocks can expect to be "taxed". Ethnic Uzbeks in Samangan province have been slaughtered for refusing to be conscripted. Ethnic Tajiks living north of Kabul have had their homes and crops burned on the assump-

tion that they probably support the Northern Alliance, a largely Tajik group of rebels.

Rule by teenage zealots with guns has further impoverished a country that was wretched before. The civil war has disrupted agriculture, as has the Taliban's habit of wrecking irrigation systems in areas suspected of disloyalty. Women are barred from most kinds of work, which is tough for families that used to depend on female breadwinners. Useful skills such as medicine or engineering grow rarer by the day: girls are barred from going to school, three-quarters of boys have no schools to go to, and most Afghans with



internationally-marketable qualifications have long since left the country. The Taliban's bans on alcohol, music, kites, television, western dresses and most kinds of art, besides making Afghan cities dreary, has thrown countless brewers, musicians, kite makers, television salesmen, tailors and artists out of work.

What can outsiders do to help?

The Taliban distrust foreigners, so past efforts by outsiders to make life less awful for Afghans have met dogmatic resistance. Aid workers have been accused of spreading Christianity and deported or even imprisoned. Afghans working for aid agencies have been persecuted.

Since America threatened to wage war on the Taliban over their harbouring of Osama bin Laden, aid work has suddenly become markedly more difficult. The Taliban have grabbed relief supplies, ordered landmine removers to stop work, and threatened to hang anyone found using a satellite telephone. But it is not clear how rigidly these edicts are being enforced. In the Western city of Herat, the governor is reportedly allowing UN agencies to continue their operations so long as they do so in a single office under Taliban supervision, and allow the Taliban to monitor their communications. Those who wish to help Afghans can start by making sure that the refugee

camps hastily being set up in neighbouring Pakistan and elsewhere have enough money, food, medicine and tents to cope with the coming influx. British prime minister Tony Blair stressed on September 25th that "our fight is with that regime, not with the people of Afghanistan", and promised increased food aid.

For the sake of those trapped in Afghanistan, it must be hoped that an American attack, if it comes, is short, precise and effective. Few Afghans would mourn the passing of the terrorists who use their country as a training ground. Many would like to see the Taliban toppled, too, especially if a quick



American victory were followed by a huge inflow of American aid.

But some Afghans will see an American attack as an attack on Islam, or on their nation. If American troops meet determined resistance and the war lasts for several months, hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions may starve. Could America drop food on affected areas even as its troops fight the Taliban, as some have suggested? It would require brave pilots and heroic organisation. America's attempt to bring food to war-torn Somalia in 1993 was a disaster; a similar operation in landlocked Afghanistan could be even harder.

Even if America takes only days to defeat the Taliban and wipe out al-Qaeda, establishing a new, tolerant regime in Afghanistan will be tricky. The last Afghan leader perceived to be a foreign stooge, the Soviet-backed Muhammad Najibullah, faced continual nationalistic uprisings and was deposed. Later the Taliban castrated and murdered him. Solving Afghanistan's problems is not, of course, President George Bush's top priority. But a less miserable Afghanistan might prove a less fertile breeding ground, and a less friendly training ground, for terrorists.

Courtesy: The Economist of London.

This may be a long war

America should beware. Afghanistan has been the graveyard of great armies, from the British in the 19th century to the in the 1980s

ANTHONY PAUL

IF the West really is at war with a fundamentalist Muslim army, put aside any notion that this conflict

will be short-lived. Not to understand this would be to repeat a mistake many analysts made in 1979, when the Soviet Union



invaded Afghanistan. Shortly after the Soviets went in, *New York Times* correspondent Drew Middleton reported that "one group of military analysts believes that the Russians can finish it in four weeks." But Afghanistan became the Soviet Vietnam. After 10 years, and with the number of troops up to more than 100,000, the invaders were forced to withdraw, vanquished by *mujahideen* (holy warriors) supplied and trained by the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and others.

U.S. weapons certainly created a difference, but there was one element that made the Afghans perhaps more formidable than even Vietnam's guerrillas: the fiercely-held tenets of their religion. Afghanistan's *mullahs* had declared this to be a *jihad* (holy war). To conduct oneself honorably in such a conflict guarantees immortality. Sayed Naim Majrooh, a young Kabul

chemical engineer-turned-guerrilla, explained to me as we sat in 1980 by a campfire outside Kandahar, now Osama bin Laden territory: "If I kill just one Russian and survive, I become a *ghazi*, the surviving warrior of a *jihad*. If the Russians kill me, I'm a *shahid*, a martyr who goes immediately to heaven. Either way, my future is in paradise."

Re-reading the stories I filed to ASIaweek from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border in the late 1970s and early 1980s revives for me memories of mujahideen ferocity. Just as significant was their mastery of simple weapons. In an essay last week, Stephen King, author of horror novels, noted something similar about the Sept. 11 hijackers:



"This was men armed with nothing but knives and box cutters relying on simple speed to keep people off balance long enough to accomplish their goals. Cost of weaponry? Based on what we know now, less than \$100."

Engineer Majrooh's cousin and fellow *mujahid*, Sayeed Walid Majrooh, was my eyewitness for a famous incident early in the war in which four illiterate goatherds, the Shahzada brothers, destroyed a Soviet tank almost with their bare hands. Hiding on a narrow mountain road, they rolled boulders to the front and rear of the last tank in a convoy. The tank's 115-mm main armament couldn't get low enough to blast the obstructions. To prevent

the tank crew calling for help, one of the brothers attacked the radio aerial with an ax. Another brother rammed his rifle butt against the tank's machine-gun, forcing it to fire uselessly into the air. The other two piled bushes on their prize, set them alight and waited for the external fuel tanks to explode. Cost of weaponry: one rifle, one ax and some matches.

Just as with the U.S. in Vietnam, the Soviet war in Afghanistan in the end came down to a question of morale. By 1989, Soviet military and civilian patience was running out and the economy was in disarray. But otherworldly ambitions sustained the mujahideen. Most

nations' poets agree with Shakespeare that war's a grim-visag'd thing; not in Afghanistan, where poets seem to celebrate it. In Islamabad I came across an anthology of 19th-century translations that included an instructive ballad, *A Pathan Warrior's Farewell*: *Now, when our house its mourning wears, Do not thyself give way to tears: Instruct our eldest son that I Was ever anxious thus to die. For when Death comes the brave are free So in thy dreams remember me. How long will they fight? Washington's military planners should read that Pushtu ballad.*

Courtesy: Asiaweek.

