

Searching for Osama and Omar

America has managed to smash both the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan while suffering few casualties itself. In recent days senior leaders have also been flushed out. But America has, so far, failed in what it had said was one of its principal war aims--the capture of Osama bin Laden himself

THEY think they can run, they think they can hide, because they think this country's soft and impatient," declared President George Bush over the weekend. "But they're going to continue to learn the terrible lesson that says don't mess with America." Normally such threats, uttered by the most powerful man on earth, ought to make anyone quake in their shoes. But Mr Bush has made such threats many times over the past few months. In some senses, these have been fulfilled. Afghanistan's Taliban regime has been removed from power. Al-Qaeda's operations in that country have been smashed. But Mr Bush has been thwarted in one of his principal war aims: bringing to justice the men responsible for the September 11th attacks.



lites and spy drones are supposed to be able to locate most vehicle convoys in the barren landscape. In addition, the Americans have put a \$25m bounty on Mr bin Laden's head, which ought to tempt someone to turn him in.

In recent days there has been some progress in flushing out other senior al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders. On Sunday America announced that it had in custody Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi, a Libyan who was supposed to have been in charge of paramilitary training at an al-Qaeda camp in Afghanistan, as well as Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, the Taliban's former ambassador in Pakistan. Because of the

regular press conferences Mr Zaeef held after September 11th, he became the regime's best-known spokesman. Neither man, however, was captured by the Americans but handed over to them by the Pakistanis. Altogether, the Americans say, they are now holding a total of 364 Taliban and al-Qaeda prisoners at three sites in Afghanistan and on the USS Bataan, an American warship cruising in the Arabian Sea. Many will soon be moved to a new high-security jail at the American naval base at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba.

On Tuesday American troops captured two senior al-Qaeda fighters near a huge cave complex in eastern Afghanistan. On the same day it was reported that three former ministers of the Taliban regime had surrendered to the new Afghan authorities in Kandahar. But in a sign of the reluctance felt by the Afghans themselves to adopt the American attitude that all senior Taliban are culpable, a spokesman for Kandahar's governor said that the former ministers would be granted amnesties unless specific accusations were made against them by Afghans. General Richard Myers, chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, insisted in a Pentagon briefing later that day that they be handed over to American officials. So far, Kandahar's local authorities seem unfazed by this demand. Reports from there are that the three Taliban leaders have been allowed to return to their homes.

The Americans' decision to fight the war on the ground through Afghan pro-

xies, though it has worked brilliantly from a military point of view, has stymied the hunt for Mr bin Laden and Mullah Omar. Local Afghan fighters seem to have little stomach for fighting and dying to get either man, "dead or alive" in Mr Bush's favoured phrase. After weeks of heavy bombing by America of the mountainous Tora Bora region in eastern Afghanistan, and desultory fighting by local Afghan militia, al-Qaeda's hideouts there were destroyed and some of its fighters killed or captured. But there was no sign of Mr bin Laden. He may be dead, buried under the Tora Bora's rubble. And yet no one seems to believe that. Many American officials now think that he has slipped into Pakistan and is hiding there, aided by the many supporters he has in that country. The American military has been criticised by some American newspapers for not using larger numbers of ground troops to seal off Tora Bora while bombing it.

The hunt for Mullah Omar has been equally confusing. There were repeated reports that he was in Baghram, a remote town about 100 miles north-west of Kandahar in Helmand province. At first it looked as if an American marine contingent in Kandahar had been dispatched to get him, but this was later denied, and it was claimed the marines were only investigating a nearby former Taliban base for intelligence material. Then it was reported that local Afghan leaders were negotiating with some 1,500 Taliban fighters for their surrender, along with Mullah Omar. His capture, it was

claimed, was imminent. Then Afghan sources said on Saturday January 5th, that the cornered Taliban leader had somehow escaped on a motorbike accompanied by four followers. This seems extraordinary. There are few roads in the area and, presumably, not many petrol stations. One local Afghan official then claimed that Mullah Omar had never been in Baghram after all. The local people, he explained, come from a Pushtun tribe that hates Mullah Omar's Pushtun tribe.

In fact, the Afghans, even opponents of the Taliban, have never been keen to see Mullah Omar in American custody. Hamid Karzai, the leader of the interim government in Kabul and an American favourite, initially suggested that Mullah Omar should be allowed to fade away quietly into obscurity, but Mr Karzai quickly changed his tune when American officials objected. Since then, he has reiterated his government's official policy that Mullah Omar must be captured and handed over to the Americans. But his government seems to have little influence over local leaders in the south on this issue, even though Mr Karzai himself is a Pushtun, like them. And there seems no great zeal on the part of anyone to capture the former Taliban leader. He, too, is now supposed to be in Pakistan, though this seems unlikely.

American officials are so exasperated, and embarrassed, by the failure to get either Mr bin Laden or Mullah Omar that on Monday January 7th Rear Admiral John Stufflebeem told a Pentagon brief-



raids of suspected al-Qaeda camps, despite growing calls from Afghan leaders to halt the bombing because of mounting civilian casualties.

The hunt for both Mr bin Laden and Mullah Omar is far from over, and America could yet get them, dead or alive. But if it didn't, would it matter? Mr Bush seems to believe it would. Though he has made it clear that killing or capturing Mr bin Laden would not mark the end of his war on terrorism, and at times has seemed to lose interest in the hunt, he has invariably come back to his promise to get him. A majority of the American public backs that view, according to a recent public opinion poll commissioned by CBS News, a television network. The poll found that 60% of respondents believed the war on terrorism would not be won until Mr bin Laden had been found.

Getting Mr bin Laden would ensure that he, at least, does not plan another atrocity. But beyond that, there may not be much to gain by getting either man and yet, strangely, something to lose by not getting them. The deterrent value of their death or capture may not be great because, those who share their fanaticism do not seem rational enough to be deterred. But the danger of letting either man escape especially Mr bin Laden is obvious: that more rational, though equally bloodthirsty and determined terrorists, might conclude that it is possible to attack America on a grand scale, and with impunity.

This piece first appeared in the current issue of the Economist of London.

Afghan girls dust off their math

AMY WALDMAN, New York Times

SHAFIQA Abdulwaquil stared at the division problem and thought, hard. She stared some more, her brow furrowed. Math once came easily to her, and this solution should have too. But she was 12 years old the last time she tried to do a division problem. Now she is 17. The mind is an agile instrument, but five years of not studying is a long time. Those years cannot be matched by 15 days - the amount of time she has been back in school since the day in 1996 when the Taliban sent her home.

It is winter in Afghanistan, when schools are usually closed because of the lack of heat.

But across the country, at high schools and home schools, tens of thousands of girls are shaking off the chill and the mental cobwebs and bending their heads to shared, worn books. At the Lycee Ariana, held at Ariana Afghan High School, 500 girls are in class, with another 200 to 300 waiting to register and start. More arrive every day, as word spreads by radio and word of mouth that the Ministry of Education is offering remedial classes.

Boys have come too, in numbers almost as large. The school's director, Maliha Khairzada, said that the young men had suffered in their own way. More than half their teachers had been dismissed for being of the wrong sex. They had been expected to study Arabic religious texts too advanced even for their teachers. They had been forced to wear turbans to class.

But at least they had been in class, which the girls had not. So today, crammed four to a desk, the girls - many now women - giggled with excitement.

Their teachers did too. "I am so happy I cannot fit in my clothes," said Olia Hoseiniyi, a supervisor at the school. But their task is daunting. Many of the younger girls have forgotten how to read and write, teachers say. The older ones find their memories of math and biology hazy. For the teachers, in particular, the loss in learning is distressing.

These girls, encouraged to study by their parents, were the vanguard in a country where female literacy was appallingly low. Only 4 percent to 10 percent of women in Afghanistan can read. The male literacy rate is about 40



percent. The schools where they are meant to learn, meanwhile, are in disarray, and often in ruins. UN officials estimate that 2,000 schools in the country were destroyed by more than 20 years of war.

Ariana is largely intact, except for the badly damaged wing at the back, but it is barren. There are few books; there is no paper. The girls spend much of the time passing books around to read aloud.

There is no way to quantify how difficult it will be to restore the confidence of tens of thousands of girls and help them catch up in their studies. The school supervisor said some of her students had forgotten "100 percent" of what they once knew.

In some cases, their psyches are equally damaged, after years of depression, although many of them appear to be springing back.

As Shafiq Abdulwaquil put it: "Every day it's easier for me. Every day, I remember something new."

For five years, she sewed clothes while her education faded in her memory. With each year, the facts and figures became hazier, just as her hope that she would ever learn again grew fainter. Most girls at school now said the same. Nadia Hashimi said she thought she would die washing clothes,

so interminable seemed the Taliban-imposed drudgery of the last five years. Her memory of what she learned in school is dim, though her recollections of wiping glasses and sweeping floors are vivid.

She sneaked to private English classes, her books under her burqa, but otherwise her days were a monotonous blur.

"We swept, cleaned the house, washed the clothes, washed the glasses," she said, in near-perfect English. "It is very dumb that every day we were washing clothes."

But now, here she was, sitting expectantly in an unexpectedly exotic place: a school. It was her first day back since the Taliban had ended her education a year before she was to have graduated. She said she had forgotten almost everything, especially math.

Still, she vowed to catch up, graduate next fall and go to a university. "My parents' one hope is that their son and their daughter complete their education," she said. Belqis Omarkhil, 24, sat next to her. She had three children during her hiatus from school. The Taliban had come when she had only a year of school left. She was back today, determined to finish, with her husband's support. She said she hoped to become a doctor.

Shamima Joodi, 21, said her husband had encouraged her to return to school, too. She married him six months ago, when she thought she would never be in a classroom again. She wants to be a lawyer.

Marriage and motherhood will not deter them, they said; their relatives, and their husbands' relatives, will take care of the children.

"And there's kindergarten," said Nadia Hashimi, who wants to be a journalist.

Shafiq Abdulwaquil wants to be a doctor, too, less for intellectual or altruistic reasons than practical ones. Doctors were the only women allowed to work under the Taliban. So she says she will not take the chance of ever being confined to home again.