

War crimes of Afghanistan: The death convoy

Witness reports and the probing of a mass grave point to war crimes. Does the United States have any responsibility for the atrocities of its allies? A NEWSWEEK investigation.

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TRUDGING over the moonscape of Dasht-e-Leili, a desolate expanse of low rolling hills in northern Afghanistan, Bill Haglund spotted clues half-buried in the gray-beige sand. Strings of prayer beads. A woolen skullcap. A few shoes. Those remnants, along with track marks and blade scrapes left by a bulldozer, suggested that Haglund had found what he was looking for. Then he came across a human tibia, three sets of pelvic bones and some ribs.

Mass graves are not always easy to spot, though trained investigators know the signs. "You look for disturbance of the earth, differences in the vegetation, areas that have been machined over," says Haglund, a forensic anthropologist and pioneer in the field of "human-rights archeology". At Dasht-e-Leili, a 15-minute drive from the Northern alliance prison at Sheberghan, scavenging animals had brought the evidence to the surface. Some of the gnawed bones were old and bleached, but some were from bodies so recently buried the bones still carried tissue. The area of bulldozer activity roughly an acre suggested burials on a large scale. A stray surgical glove also caught Haglund's eye. Such gloves are often used by people handling corpses, and could be evidence, Haglund thought, of "a modicum of planning."

Haglund was in Dasht-e-Lili on more than a hunch. In January, two investigators from the Boston-based Physicians for Human Rights had argued their way into the nearby Sheberghan prison. What they saw shocked them. More than 3,000 Taliban prisoners who had surrendered to the victorious Northern Alliance forces at the fall of Konduz in late November were crammed, sick and starving, into a facility with room for only 800. The Northern Alliance commander of the prison acknowledged the charnel-house conditions, but pleaded that he had no money. He begged the PHR to send food and supplies, and to ask the United Nations to dig a well so the prisoners could drink unpolluted water.

But stories of a deeper horror came from the prisoners themselves. However awful their conditions, they were the lucky ones. They were alive. Many hundreds of their comrades, they said, had been killed on the journey to Sheberghan from Konduz by being stuffed into sealed cargo containers and left to asphyxiate. Local aid workers and Afghan officials quietly confirmed that they had heard the same stories. They confirmed, too, persistent reports about the disposal of many of the dead in mass graves at Dasht-e-Lili.

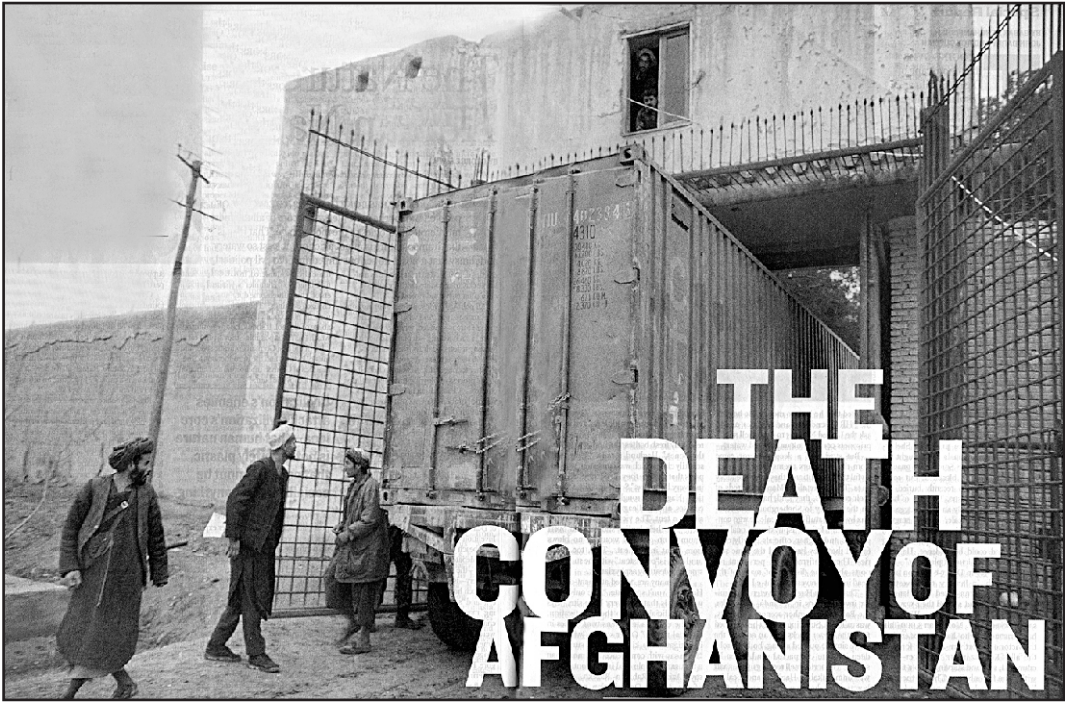
That's when Haglund, a veteran of similar investigations in Rwanda, Sri Lanka, the Balkans and other scenes of atrocity, was called in. Standing at what he reckoned from the 'dozer tracks was an edge of the grave site, he pushed a long, hollow probe deep into the compacted sand. Then he sniffed. The acrid smell reeking up the shaft was unmistakable. Haglund and local laborers later dug down; at five feet, they came upon a layer of decomposing corpses, lying pressed together in a row. They dug a trial trench about six yards long, and in that short length found 15 corpses. "They were relatively fresh bodies: the flesh was still on the bones," Haglund recalls. "They were scantily clad, which was consistent with reports that [before they died] they had been in a very hot place." Some had their hands tied. Haglund brought up three of the corpses, and a colleague conducted autopsies in a tent. The victims were all young men, and their bodies showed "no overt trauma" no gunshot wounds, no blows from blunt instruments. This, too, Haglund says, is "consistent" with the survivors' stories of death by asphyxiation.

How many are buried at Dasht-e-Leili? Haglund won't speculate. "They only thing we know is that it's a very large site," says a UN official privy to the investigation, and there was "a high density of bodies in the trial trench." Other sources who have investigated the killings aren't surprised. "I can say with confidence that more than a thousand people died in the containers," says Aziz ur Rahman Razekhi, director of the Afghan Organization of Human Rights. NEWSWEEK's extensive inquiries of prisoners, truck drivers, Afghan militiamen and local villagers including interviews with survivors who licked and chewed each other's skin to stay alive suggest also that many hundreds of people died.

The dead of Dasht-e-Leile and the horrific manner of their killing are one of the dirty little secrets of the Afghan war. The episode is more than just another atrocity in a land that has seen many. The killings illustrate the problems America will face if it opts to fight wars by proxy, as the United States did in Afghanistan, using small numbers of US Special Forces calling in air

power to support local fighters on the ground. It also raises questions about the responsibility Americans have for the conduct of allies who may have no interest in applying protections of the Geneva conventions. The benefit in fighting a proxy-style war in Afghanistan was victory on the cheap cheap, at any rate, in American blood. The cost, NEWSWEEK's investigation has established, is that American forces were working intimately with "allies" who committed what could well qualify as war crimes.

Nothing that NEWSWEEK's learned suggests that American forces had advance knowledge of the killings, witnessed the prisoners being stuffed into the unventilated trucks or were in a position to prevent that. They were in the area of the prison at the time the containers were delivered, although probably not when they were opened. The small group of Special Forces soldiers were more focused at the time on prison security, and preventing an uprising such as the bloody outbreak that had happened days earlier in the prison fort at Qala Jangi. The soldiers surely heard stories of deaths in the containers, but may have thought them exaggerated.



HUMAN CARGO: A container truck of Taliban prisoners pulling into the gates of Sheberghan prison

gerated. They also may have believed that the dead were war casualties, or wounded prisoners who, among thousands of their comrades, simply didn't survive the rugged journey from the surrender point to the prison. But it's also true that Pentagon spokesmen have obfuscated when faced with questions on the subject. Officials across the administration did not respond to repeated requests by NEWSWEEK's for a detailed accounting of US activities in the Konduz, Mazar-e-Sharif and Sheberghan areas at the time in question, and Defense Department spokespersons have made statements that are false.

Questions can be raised, as well, about international agencies. How seriously has the United Nations pursued investigations of what happened at Sheberghan? The reports of atrocity come at a time when the international community is desperately trying to bring stability to Afghanistan. Well-meaning officials may be wondering if a full-scale investigation might set off a new round of Afghan slaughter. Would it be worth it? A confidential UN memorandum, parts of which were made available to NEWSWEEK, says that the findings of investigations into the Dasht-e-Leili graves "are sufficient to justify a fully-fledged criminal investigation." It says that based on "information collected," the site "contains bodies of Taliban POW's who died of suffocation during transfer from Konduz to Sheberghan." A witness quoted in the report puts the death toll at 960. Yet the report also raises urgent questions. "Considering the political sensitivity of this case and related protection concerns, it is strongly recommended that all activities relevant to this case be brought to a half until a decision is made concerning the final goal of the exercise: criminal trial, truth commission, other, etc."

The militia leader whose forces allegedly carried out the killings in Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum, one of Afghanistan's most ruthless and effective warlords. Dostum's spokesperson, Faizullah Zaki, told NEWSWEEK that many people did die of suffocation. But he put the total number at "between 100 and 120 people, a few from each container," and said that some of them "were seriously injured and died en route." He suggested that the uprising at Qala Jangi prison, just three days earlier, might have affected their treatment. "If the incident at Qala Jangi hadn't happened, it's possible that the prisoners would have been transferred more peacefully. There would have been less irregularities," he said, adding: "They suffocated. Died, not killed. Nobody killed anybody." Zaki also said that General Dostum was not in

the place where the prisoners were loaded into containers. "The technical details of the transfer were left to lower-level commanders," he said, adding that "there was a handful of American soldiers that didn't leave [Dostum's] side" during the period in question.

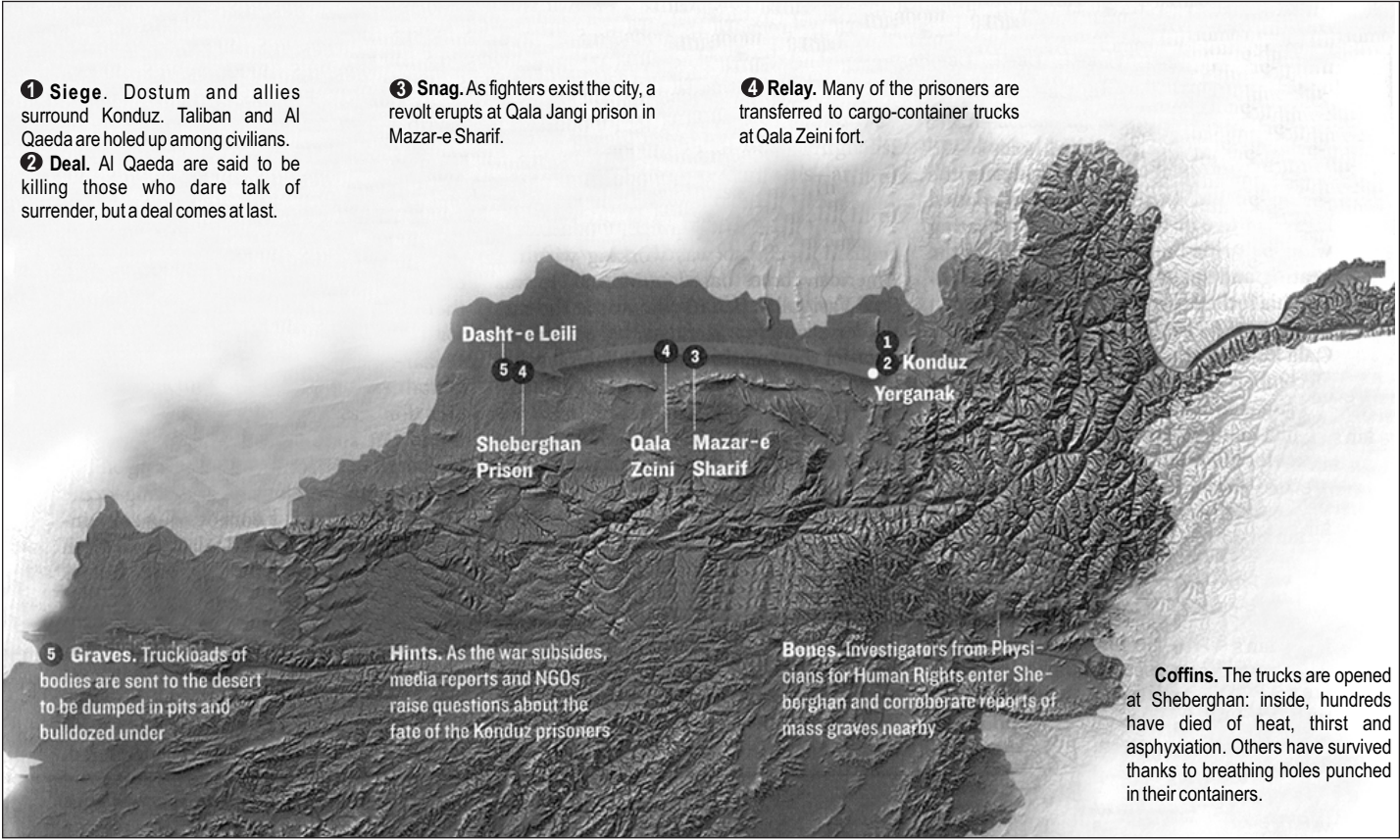
The close involvement of American soldiers with General Dostum can only make an investigation all the more sensitive. "The issue nobody wants to discuss is the involvement of US forces," says Jennifer Leaning, professor at the Harvard School of Public Health and one of the pair of Physicians for Human Rights investigators who pushed their way into Sheberghan. "US forces were in the area at the time. What did the US know, and when and where -- and what did they do about it?"

The Taliban and Qaeda forces at Konduz surrendered in a negotiated deal that took two to three days to hammer out. According to Shams-ul-Haq (Shamuk) Naseri, a mid-level Northern Alliance commander who was present, the talks were held in the presence of three American intelligence officers and a dozen or more Special Forces soldiers. Northern Alliance commanders,

dozens of American Special Forces troops, according to US and Afghan participants. Some of the Special Forces teams were zipping around the area on four-wheeler motorcycles; Dostum was filmed at the time enjoying a ride, on the back of one. The Americans provided much of the food and water given to the waiting masses. But they were there primarily to provide credible muscle, a message that was reinforced by the frequent appearance of US bombers streaking overhead.

At about this time, soldiers from Dostum's militia arrived at a container depot on the outskirts of Mazar-e-Sharif, about 100 miles to the west, and recruited a driver we'll call Mohammed, a bearded man in his mid-40s. (NEWSWEEK has changed the names of several witnesses in this report to lessen the chance of reprisals.) Mohammed was told that his container truck was needed to ship captive Taliban fighters to Sheberghan prison. He was to pick them up that evening at the old fort in Qala Zeini, which lies on the road between Mazar-e Sharif and Sheberghan. The road actually passes through the fort: one gate in, one gate out.

Mohammed arrived at Qala Zeini



DEAD MEN'S ROAD: Hundreds of Taliban and Al Qaida fighters surrendered at Konduz but never lived to see the inside of a prison

their overstuffed cells. "We're dying. Give us water!" some shouted. "We are human, not animals." Mohammed used a hammer and spike to bang holes in his container, until one of Dostum's soldiers heard the banging and angrily demanded to know what he was doing. Mohammed said that he was sealing holes to prevent the prisoners' escape.

After the soldier had gone, one of the prisoners in the container stuck his face close to one of the holes. "Are you a Muslim?" he asked. "Yes," Mohammed replied. "Look at my tongue," said the prisoner, and stuck it out. It was cracked from dehydration. Mohammed filled a two-liter Fanta bottle with water and passed it in through the hole. He also pushed in 10 pieces of bread, all he had. "Thank Allah you are a Muslim," the prisoner said.

Some of the other drivers Newsweek has traced say they, too, tried to help. One described how he

prisoners with their own turbans.

Those who didn't move fast enough or who tried to resist were beaten. Most prisoners, says Abdullah, were bound around their upper arms and blindfolded, but some were hogtied. Unruly prisoners were grabbed by hand and foot and swung into the containers on their bellies. When the containers were full, they were locked. Abdullah was in no doubt what he was witnessing. "The only purpose was to kill the prisoners," he says.

Wondering whom he could alert to these preparations, Abdullah recalled an acquaintance who was working with the American forces based in Mazar. He was Said Vasiqullah Sadat, who was at the surrender negotiations and served as a translator for the Americans. Abdullah says that he told Vasiqullah what was happening, and he says Vasiqullah responded: "We will act." The next day, Abdullah said, a group of Americans arrived at Qala Zeini in

Spann was killed and the American John Walker Lindh was discovered - had occurred on Nov. 25. "Many of them were taking care of arrangements for shipping Mike Spann's body out of Mazar airport." But, says Vasiqullah, the containers could not have remained a secret for long. "I think the Americans found out soon," he says. "They were at Sheberghan prison from the beginning."

At 11 am on Nov 29, according to the driver Mohammed, a convoy of 13 container trucks set out from Qala Zeini. Each driver had soldiers in the cab beside him. A driver we'll call Ghassan, who had picked up his load of human cargo at a concrete bridge 31 miles west of Mazar-e-Sharif, was also on the move around this time. He re-calls that some in his container were alive, and beating on the sides. "They just want water... Keep driving," he was ordered.

By the time the trucks arrived at Sheberghan prison, many were ominously quiet. Mohammed was

reached the prison, he says, only 20 to 30 in his container were alive.

Other survivors now in Sheberghan tell almost identical stories. One 20-year-old was shoved into a fully packed container. After about eight hours, he thinks, the prisoners began kicking the sides of the container and shouting for air and water. None came. Some of the prisoners began using their turbans to soak and drink the sweat off each other's bodies. After a few more hours many of the prisoners started going crazy and bit each other's fingertips, arms and legs. Anything to get moisture. By the time they reached Sheberghan, the young man says, only about 40 in his container were still alive.

For some, the agony in the containers was intensified because they were tied up. This appears to have been a fate reserved for Pakistani -- and perhaps other non-Afghan -- prisoners. Mahmood, 20, says he surrendered at Konduz along with 1,500 other Pakistanis. All were bound hand and foot either with their own turbans or with strips ripped from their clothing, he says. Then they were packed in container trucks "like cattle," he says. He reckons that about 100 people died in his container.

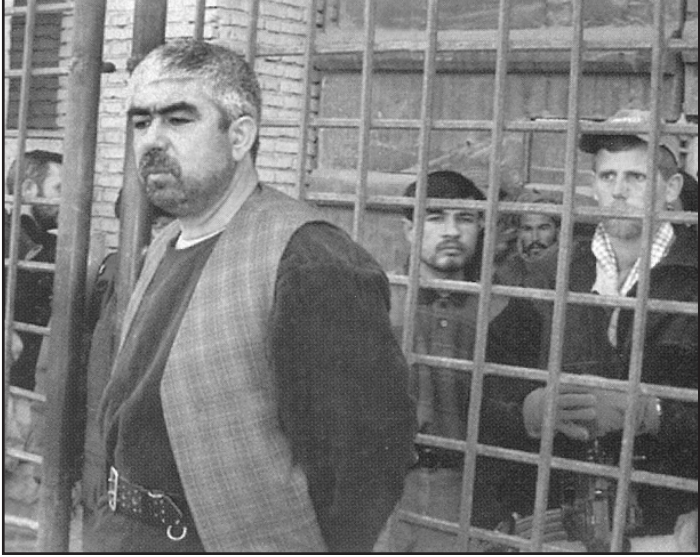
The drivers remain tormented by what they took part in. "Why weren't there any United Nations people there to see the dead bodies?" asks one. "Why wasn't anything being done?" Another driver shook uncontrollably as he spoke with Newsweek.

The convoys of the dead and dying, along with many truckloads of living prisoners, seem to have arrived at Sheberghan for perhaps 10 days. Prying eyes were kept away. The Red Cross, learning of the arrivals of prisoners from Konduz, applied on Nov. 29 to get into Sheberghan. Dostum's commander at the prison promised that access would be granted within 24 hours. In fact, it was not until Dec. 10 that the Red Cross got into the prison. By then, most of the bodies had probably been buried. (Dostum's spokesmen denies that access was blocked by prison officials.)

There were witnesses near the burial site who noticed unusual activity. The hamlet of Lab-e Jar is about half a mile east of the grave site. On several nights in the first half of December, Dostum's soldiers forbade the villagers to leave their homes. Most of the villagers are now too frightened to talk. "Bodies have been buried there for years," says one. "You know what happened. I know what happened. But nothing is going to change if we talk about it." Still, Newsweek found some who were willing to say what they saw. One man, 49, claims that around the first week in December, Dostum's soldiers blocked the dirt road running past Dasht-e Leili for several days. "No cars, no donkey carts, not even pedestrians were allowed to go down the road," he says. He personally saw four or five container trucks at the burial site, he says. When UN investigators talked with the people of Lab-e Jar in May, two residents told of seeing bulldozers at work on the site around the middle of December.

A widening circle of organizations and individuals know, in broad terms, what happened after the fall of Konduz. The Red Cross has questioned survivors and compiled a report about the events; top officials at the Red Cross's Geneva headquarters have met to discuss, inconclusively, what to do next. A pair of UN investigators were present when Haglund dug his trial trench across the Dasht-e-Leili grave site. After questioning local witnesses, they, too, compiled a report.

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WORKING WITH THE GENERAL: Dostum and an armed Special Forces member behind a gate at Sheberghan prison

fighters trapped in Konduz surrendered "like sheep," according to Naseri. "One went and the rest followed". The agreed site for the actual surrender was Yerganak, a desert spot about five miles west of Konduz. Most of the top Taliban and foreign commanders drove out, and their vehicles were promptly confiscated by the Northern Alliance. The rest walked. Four checkpoints had been set up at Yerganak to disarm the fighters and load them onto whatever vehicles were available: pickups, big-wheeled, open-topped Russian Kamaz trucks, even some container trucks. But the numbers streaming out of Konduz overwhelmed the facilities, and most of those surrendering waited three or four days in the desert.

Dostum and another Northern Alliance commander, Atta Mohammed, were at Yerganak to monitor the surrender. So were

about 7 that evening. Several other container trucks were already waiting inside the fort. So were about 150 soldiers, all Afghans. At about 9, the prisoners -- a mix of Afghans, Pakistanis, Arabs and Chechens -- arrived from Yerganak in open trucks and pickups. Soldiers ordered the prisoners down from the trucks and stripped them of their turbans, caps and vests. Then they herded the captives into the containers, as many as 200 to a truck. The fighters realized they were not going home, as promised. "F---Shamuk Naseri," one driver recalls a prisoner's screaming. "He betrayed us." The doors of the container trucks were locked.

The prisoners probably realized their fate. "Death by container" has been a cheap means of mass murder used by both the Taliban and the Northern Alliance for at least five years. Abandoned freight containers -- international standard size, 40 feet



SWEPT UNDERGROUND: Dasht-e Leili, where cargoes of Taliban corpses were dumped and buried

also poked holes in his container and tried to bring water to the prisoners. But Dostum's soldiers spotted him, and five of them gave him a beating with their rifle butts. Mohammed saw the beating and spent the rest of the night inside his locked cab.

Someone else saw a similar scene at Qala Zeini, and tried to send a warning. In December, Abdullah was in the settlement of Langar Khaneh, which is close to the fort of Qala Zeini. When the gates of Qala Zeini were closed for a day and a half, and traffic diverted through Langar Khaneh, Abdullah's curiosity was aroused. He made his way over to the fort and peered inside. As he watched, four container trucks were driven into the fort. Not long after, prisoners arrived in pickups and Kamaz trucks, he says. Soldiers in the fort -- Dostum's men, Abdullah says -- proceeded to tie up the

two dust-colored pickups. But the containers were gone, and -- says Abdullah -- the Americans turned around and drove back to Mazar.

Vasiqullah is cautious when asked about this version of events. He says that on the fourth day of the surrender at Yerganak -- Nov. 28 -- he headed back to Mazar with several cars full of American soldiers. Some of these were billeting in Atta Mohammed's headquarters in Mazar.

Vasiqullah confirms that the "Soon" heard about prisoners' being transferred into containers at Qala Zeini. But he will not confirm that he heard this from the witness from Langar Khaneh. Nor will he confirm that he passed the news on to the Americans he was working with. "The Americans were distracted at this time," he said. The uprising at the Qala Jangi prison in Mazar-e-Sharif -- in which CIA operative Mike



SURVIVORS' STORIES: Thousands of prisoners crowd the Sheberghan courtyard