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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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**BITING THE HAND...**

by Carol Rose

"We don't wanna make anybody panic, but folks, you live in a high-threat area. It is not a normal situation when everyone on the street has an AK-47 fully automatic weapon slung over his shoulder."

Federal Agent Jeff Thomas was doing his best to increase the already high level of paranoia in Peshawar. "This is the third time in four years that our Mobile Security Unit has been here, so obviously you have a problem," he told the audience of around 25 Americans who showed up for the U.S. State Department's "Personal Protection Seminar," entitled: "The Art of the Ninja."

"There should be 200 people here," said Thomas, shaking his head as he ran through a slide show that detailed how we could detect bombs in our cars, shake terrorists off our tails, drive through road blocks and reduce the odds of being taken hostage during an airplane hijacking by sitting in the middle seats.



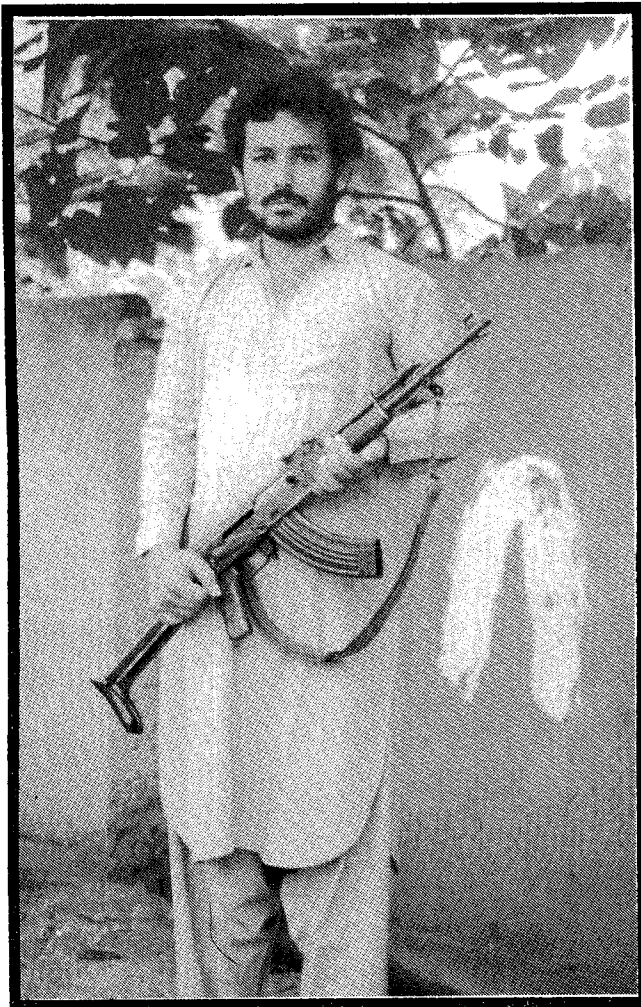
Not everybody needs an Ak-47; Target practice with a 1940-era rifle.

"Americans have a poor attitude toward security," said Thomas. "In fact, it's downright deplorable. The only other environment that has more potential for violence than Peshawar is Beirut."

This final bit of hyperbole I found hard to swallow coming from a man who says he spent five years as a New York City cop. I suspect that I am more at risk of assault in New York, Washington or London than here. But

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An Afghan with his Kalishnakov in a suburban Peshawar neighborhood.

the point isn't whether my odds are better in Peshawar than New York. What interests me are the roots of violence, which differ greatly between here and America.

What sets Peshawar and the Afghan border areas apart from other violent places, such as New York, is that the brutality often is politically motivated.

Street crime isn't a problem here, at least not yet. To be sure, the night skies are filled with the red glow of tracer bullets and the popping sounds of gunfire, but usually the salvos are part of a wedding celebration. The scowling demeanor of many Afghan men can be unnerving, until you see them greet a friend with a bear hug and an ear-to-ear grin.

Although I rarely feel in danger, occasionally I run across an Afghan who rails against America or glowers at the sight of an unveiled woman. And I share with many foreign aid

workers and Afghan moderates a recurring nightmare that I am kidnapped or killed by an extremist faction of the mujahideen.

The bad dream recently became a terrible reality for my friend, Xavier Bouan, a Frenchman who was kidnapped in Afghanistan and released only after he agreed to pay \$2,000 in ransom. Two Americans, Joel LeHart and William Lewis, were kidnapped in Afghanistan last July and have yet to be released.

Violence isn't limited to the Afghan side of the border. Four United Nations employees were abducted by mujahideen in broad daylight in Pakistan's tribal areas in early August. A World Bank employee was attacked at his home in Peshawar a few days later; his captors decided to release him only because he was "local hire" and thus wouldn't bring much ransom. An Afghan

scholar, Abdul Rahim Chanzai, was abducted near his house in Peshawar not long ago and is presumed dead, apparently because he publicly criticized a mujahideen political party.

Banditry also is on the rise. Dozens of United Nations and U.S. government vehicles carrying supplies and personnel to projects inside Afghanistan have been hijacked by mujahideen commanders in recent months. Only a few have been returned. A group of bandits tried to seize a United Nations truck in broad daylight near my house last month, leading to a spectacular police shoot-out that left one person dead.

Unfortunately, the violence is expected to get worse in the coming months as "donor fatigue" leads to cuts in foreign assistance. Already, Afghans are losing lucrative jobs attached to the foreign aid community as agencies prepare to close operations by the end of the year. U.N. rations in the refugee camps have been cut. The United States and Soviet Union last week announced they would stop all military aid to the Kabul government and the mujahideen by next January, a move known in diplomatic parlance as "negative symmetry."

Increasingly, the Afghans sense that the world is "abandoning" them and embracing the Soviets instead; an ironic turn of events insofar as many Afghans believe it was their blood sacrifice that brought down the Soviet empire in the first place.

I don't blame the Afghans for feeling angry. Nor do I fault their dependence on Western aid: More than 60 private charities, a bevy of United Nations agencies and the U.S. Agency for International Development operate hundreds of projects for Afghans, both inside Afghanistan and in the Pakistan-based refugee camps. The total humanitarian aid budget for the Afghans is more than \$200 million a year. Annual covert military aid to the mujahideen has been at least that amount.

Time and again, I wonder if all this aid has hurt more than helped the Afghans. And I fight my instinct to blame the Afghans for the breakdown of law and order, aware that foreign aid is partly responsible for creating this mess in the first place.

### **Trial by Terror**

Xavier was one of the cowboys of Peshawar, the young men who volunteer for the dangerous duty of going "inside" Afghanistan. Americans working on U.S.-government contracts aren't allowed to cross the border; Washington is afraid they will be accused of being spies. Such concerns don't extend to French, German, Canadian or other European nationals the U.S. government employs for the dangerous work of implementing and monitoring its assistance projects in Afghanistan.

On the Peshawar social scene, one hasn't really arrived unless they have been in Afghanistan. At the American club bar, the one place in Peshawar where you can buy a drink, conversations linger on the glories of going across the border. The talk is reminiscent of a high-school locker-room: "How far did you get?" "Did you get inside?"

Despite this macho-babble, working inside Afghanistan is no joke, and Xavier was one of the most experienced cowboys around. He has spent the last six years going into Afghanistan for various assistance organizations, often on horseback. He speaks Persian and has dark hair, a beard and brown eyes that enable him to pass for an Afghan.

This didn't stop him from being kidnapped. Xavier was traveling with 10 Afghan colleagues through the impoverished province of Zabul, in southern Afghanistan. The team's plan was to conduct a survey of Afghan traders as part of a U.S. government program to promote agricultural trade.

What happened is reminiscent of those B-grade movies in which the local sheik invites the British Raj officers to a feast and then slaughters them. Xavier's group, likewise, was invited for lunch with a local commander. As they ate, various mujahideen seized the organization's trucks, radios, cameras and cash. Xavier was held for ransom by a man named Jamal Khan, a small-time commander with three mujahideen in his service, an abiding hatred of America and a sexual preference for little boys.

For two weeks Xavier slept in a room decorated with manacles and chains, subsisting on a diet of bread and tea. He was allowed to walk outside, but not beyond the range of his guards' kalishnakovs. He spent his days writing a secret diary, planning his escape and wondering whether he would see his family again.

At one time during his captivity, 20 village leaders met to discuss Xavier's fate. Their decision was that he should continue to be confined.

Jamal Khan, meantime, began to negotiate with Xavier about his possible release. His initial demands reflect a certain naivete about foreign assistance: he wanted Xavier to guarantee to provide three hydroelectric dams and an electricity generator for Zabul province. Later, he asked for \$100,000 cash to feed his mujahideen. After 14 long days, Xavier agreed to give him \$2,000 cash and was released.

The kidnapping may have been sanctioned by Afghan leaders in Peshawar. Jamal Khan said he was operating with permission of his party leader, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, of the Ittehad-i-Islami mujahideen party. Such conspiracy theories make sense, if only

because Sayyaf has spearheaded opposition to a United Nations 5-point plan for peace in Afghanistan, calling instead for a "military option" to overthrow the Communist government in Kabul.

Sayyaf also is the Prime Minister of the Afghan Interim Government, the Afghan government-in-exile created by the United States and Pakistan about

three years ago. Ironically, this artificial mujahideen "government" released a statement condemning the kidnapping as the act of the "self-styled Mujahideen" and said it was entirely "un-Islamic, anti-Jehad, and against international humanitarian law."

Neither international law nor Islamic pronouncements helped Xavier. Nor did the U.S. government, which has a policy of not paying ransom. Instead, Xavier convinced a local trader to front the money. Upon his release, he flew home to France.

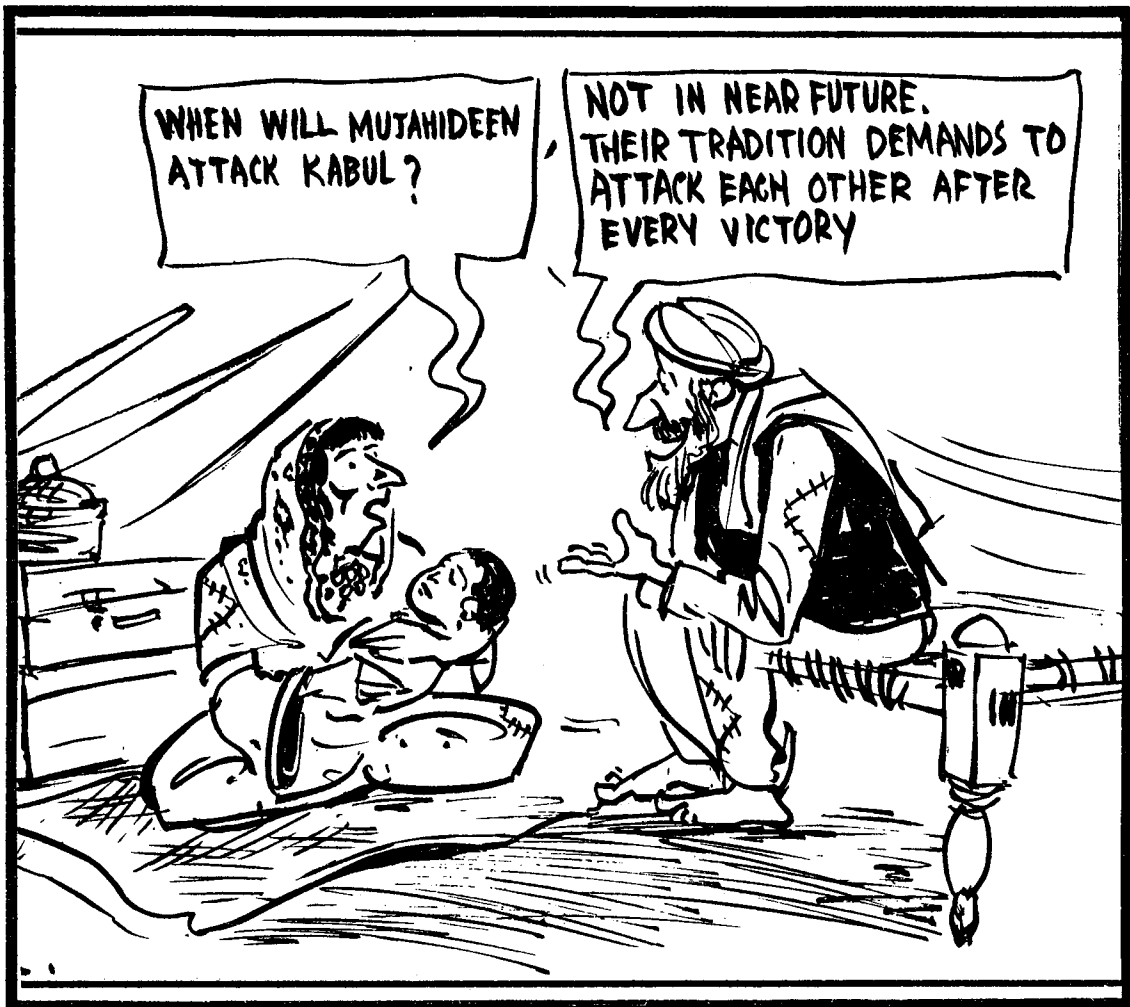
I was surprised to see Xavier back at the bar in Peshawar a few days ago. He still seemed shaken when he talked about his two weeks in captivity:

"When you're being held, the only thing you can think about is escaping," he said. "You cannot think of anything else, even for 30 seconds, just whether you will still be there at the end of the day. The commander who held me was crazy, you could see it in his eyes. Some times he looked so nice, but the next moment he would have a wild look in his eyes."

Xavier said he doesn't want anything more to do with the Afghans or Afghanistan. He vows never again to speak Persian. "When they released me they said they would cut my throat if they ever saw me again," he said. "I believe them."



"Stop War Bush Dog" sign painted by the SLO -- Saddam Liberation Organization -- on a wall in Peshawar.



Cartoon from The Frontier Post.

### Pointing the Finger

Most Afghans are not anti-American. Your typical refugee is far more interested in emigrating to America than in finding ways to kidnap Westerners.

Moreover, opinion polls in the refugee camps suggest that most Afghans don't like the mujahideen political parties. But it takes tremendous courage for an Afghan to criticize the mujahideen. Too many moderate Afghans have been killed for voicing their opinions. Truth is no defense in Peshawar.

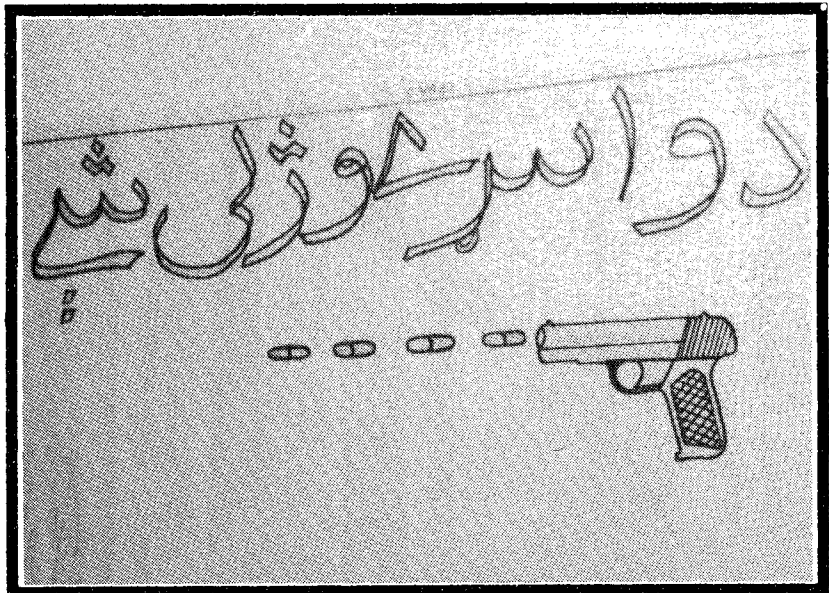
To better understand why aid workers and moderate Afghans have become targets of assassination, it is important to explore how Western aid has affected traditional power structures within Afghan society.

When the refugee influx in Pakistan first began in 1980, the refugees were not simply people in need. Western governments saw them as a powerful force for fighting communism in Afghanistan and for carrying out a proxy war against the Soviet Union. Western aid policies reflected these political aims. It was largely covert. It was mostly military. And its aim was to politicize the refugees. For example, refugees were required to join one of the seven Peshawar-based mujahideen political parties in order to get a ration card. Desperate and hungry from their long journey across the mountains, many refugees joined the first party that gave them a ration card. Once they joined a party they were under the control of its leaders, regardless of whether they agreed with the party platform.

Since the 1988 Geneva Accords and Soviet troop withdrawal from Kabul, western assistance has shifted away from the refugee camps toward reconstruction projects inside Afghanistan. As a result, power has drifted away from the political leaders in Peshawar to hundreds of mujahideen commanders in the field, who control all roads in "free" Afghanistan, and thus any foreign aid that crosses their territory.

"Each NGO [non-governmental foreign assistance organization] deals with its favorite commander in Afghanistan, which has tended to reinforce the status of the commanders in the area where they are," said Jon Bennett, director of the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief, which represents most of the private charities in Peshawar.

"In Afghanistan the most important thing is power, which is based on patronage, which means that people are fighting for money and access to resources," said Bennett. "When an NGO goes into Afghanistan, it is adding to or detracting from someone's power. When they select a favorite commander, the NGOs are affecting the power structure in the area.



"Too Many Will Kill You": Poster in an Afghan medical clinic uses symbol of a gun to warn against drugs.



"Arms Deler" shop in Peshawar: A Russian Kalishnakov costs \$600, a hand gun \$180, and a pistol disguised as a pen is \$8. Disks of hashish hang overhead on the right, cost: \$5.

"Remember also that the Afghans inside Afghanistan are isolated into different valleys; their perception of their own country is not of a nation," he said. "It is difficult to persuade a commander in valley A that you should be allowed passage to valley B, which is in more need than his. He can see a lot of needs in his valley and he won't care about the next valley. They are parochial. They don't know, or care, how international NGOs work."

Sometimes the Afghans understand all too well how foreign aid agencies work, particularly when they visit the luxurious offices of private charities and government projects in Peshawar.

"What they see in Peshawar reinforces feelings about foreign aid: marble office buildings, fancy cars, big houses and lots of foreigners," said Bennett. "They see amounts of money they could never believe and they feel they are not getting a piece of this cake. They don't understand and they feel quite sore about it. It makes it exceptionally

dangerous for NGOs to work inside Afghanistan."

### Emergency Exit

In response to the latest wave of kidnapping and hijacking, the United States government last month suspended its humanitarian assistance into Afghanistan. Three days ago, the United States and Soviet Union announced they would both stop providing weapons to the Afghans by the beginning of next year.

Halting the arms flow is long overdue. But weapons cuts now



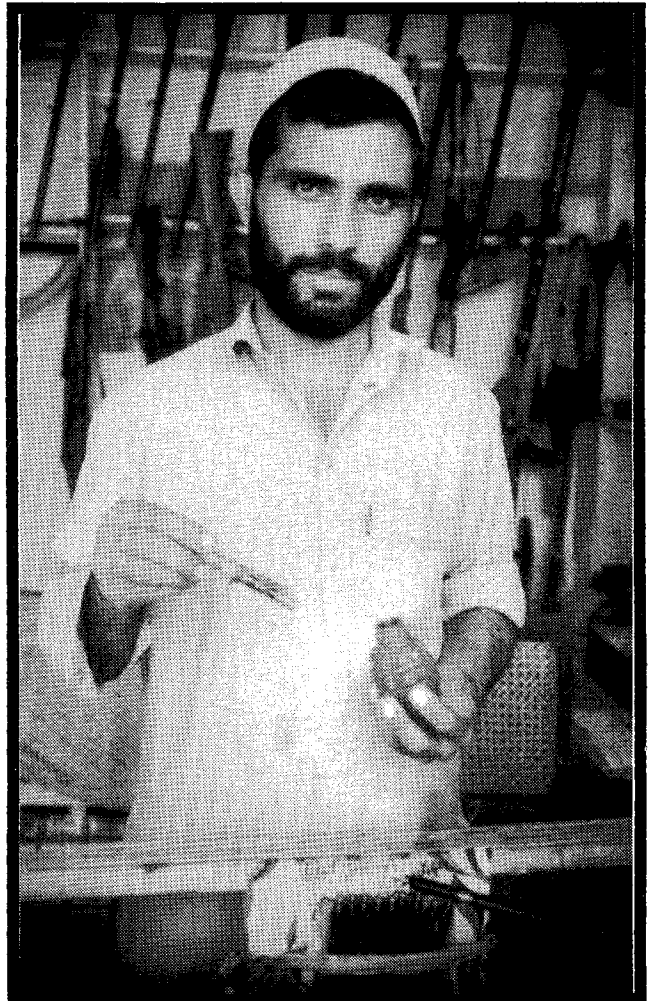
will have little short-term effect; the mujahideen have been well supplied with arms for 13 years, long enough to stockpile enough guns, grenades and rockets to keep fighting for a long time. Moreover, many mujahideen commanders now get arms from Saudi Arabia, Libya and other Arab states, who are not party to the U.S.-Soviet agreement. One mujahideen party, Hezb-i-Islami, led by an anti-American fanatic named Gulbadin Hekmatyar, says it has built two major weapons factories in Afghanistan and is now self-reliant in arms production. Many people fear a blood bath in Kabul if the Communist government ever falls.

More important than freezing the arms pipeline may be the halt in cross-border economic assistance for Afghanistan. Already, there are early-warning signs of a severe food shortage in Afghanistan this winter: food prices are rising in some provinces during the harvest season. The Kabul regime is scrambling to buy wheat on international markets and has publicly expressed concern that without Soviet food aid it will not survive the winter. Unfortunately, neither will many Afghans living in mujahideen-controlled areas. The result may be a new influx of hunger-driven refugees into Pakistan.

As the aid pie shrinks mujahideen commanders will turn increasingly to hijacking and kidnapping as a way to sustain their soldiers in the field.

Another risk in cutting U.S. humanitarian aid is that it will increase the influence of Arab donors. Already, Saudi Arabia humanitarian assistance to the mujahideen equals donations from the United States.

"I predict that next spring there will be an anti-Western backlash, fueled by the Arabs," said



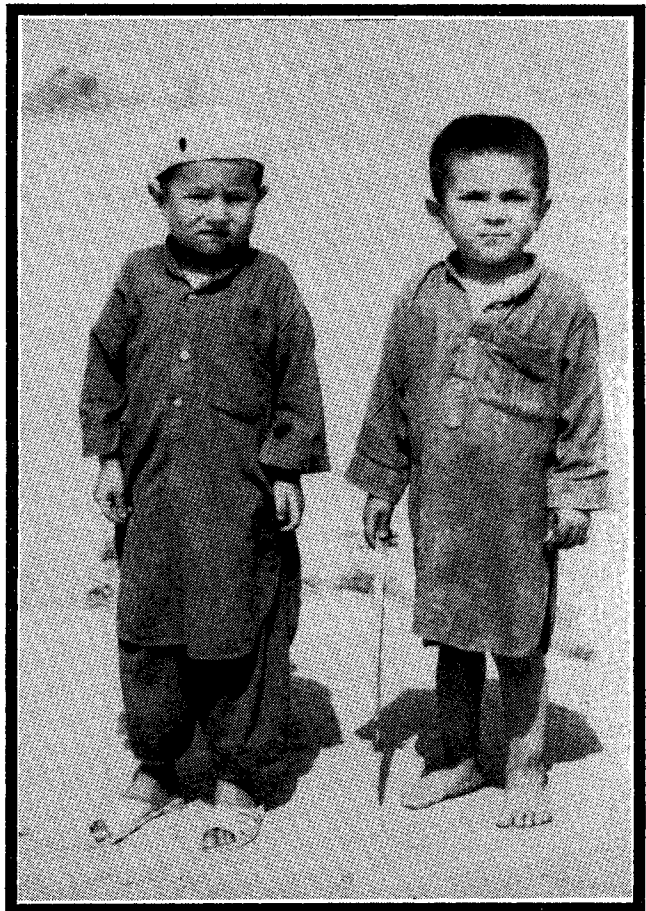
Demonstrating the pin action on a hand grenade. A gun shaped like a pen lies on the counter.

Bennett. "You will get a balance in favor of Arab money, coupled with long-time antagonism toward westerners.

"The Afghans themselves rarely attack westerners, and if they do kidnap someone they look after them," said Bennett. "But the Arabs are an unknown factor; they don't look after people at all. This will put the Afghans in a dilemma; do they accept Arab money because no one else is giving it? If so, do they also accept that [Arab] individuals here don't follow the Afghan code of conduct?"

Whatever the reasons, reduced humanitarian aid to the Afghan refugees is inevitable. Budgetary constraints and so-called "donor fatigue" dominate every discussion about the future of assistance projects here. Each kidnapping, each attempted assassination draws closer the day when the Afghans will be left to fend for themselves.

But as the international community begins its exodus from Afghanistan, leaving the well-armed mujahideen to fight it out among themselves and with the regime in Kabul, let us not pretend that our refugee policy has had anything to do with charity. It has had everything to do with politics.



Peace in their time?