CVR-29

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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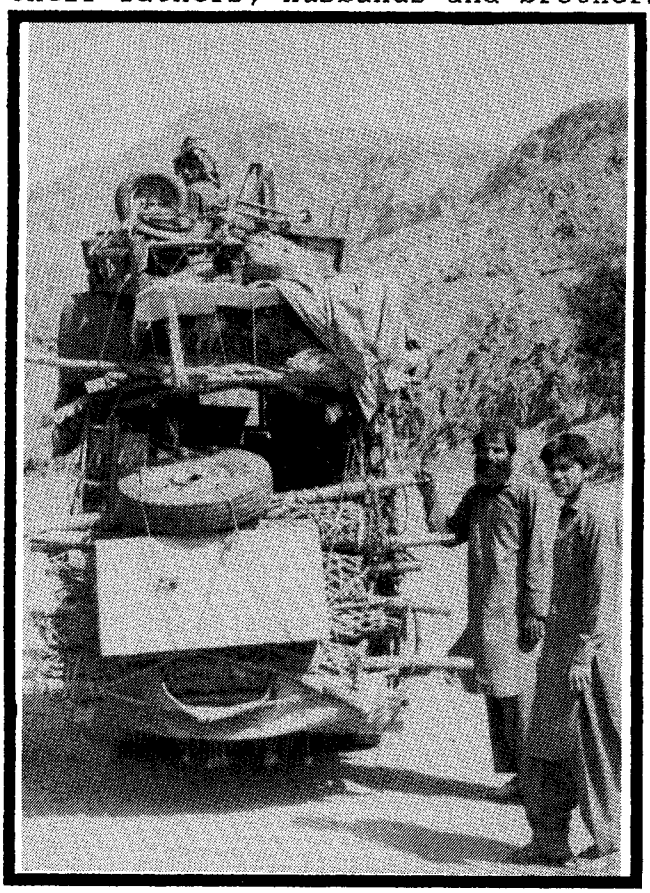
RETURN

by Carol Rose

An endless caravan of heavily-laden buses, lorries and donkeys moves past the black iron gates that divide Afghanistan and Pakistan in the border town of Torkham.

Bearded money-changers sit alongside the road, haggling with turban-clad men over fluctuations in the value of the Afghan currency. Veiled women and children wait in crowded mini-vans as their fathers, husbands and brothers make last-minute financial transactions before crossing the border. Nearby, garishly-painted Bedford trucks are piled 20-feet high with the remnants of life in the Afghan refugee camps: beds, blankets, pots, window frames, doors, bricks, wooden roof beams, chickens and the occasional water buffalo.

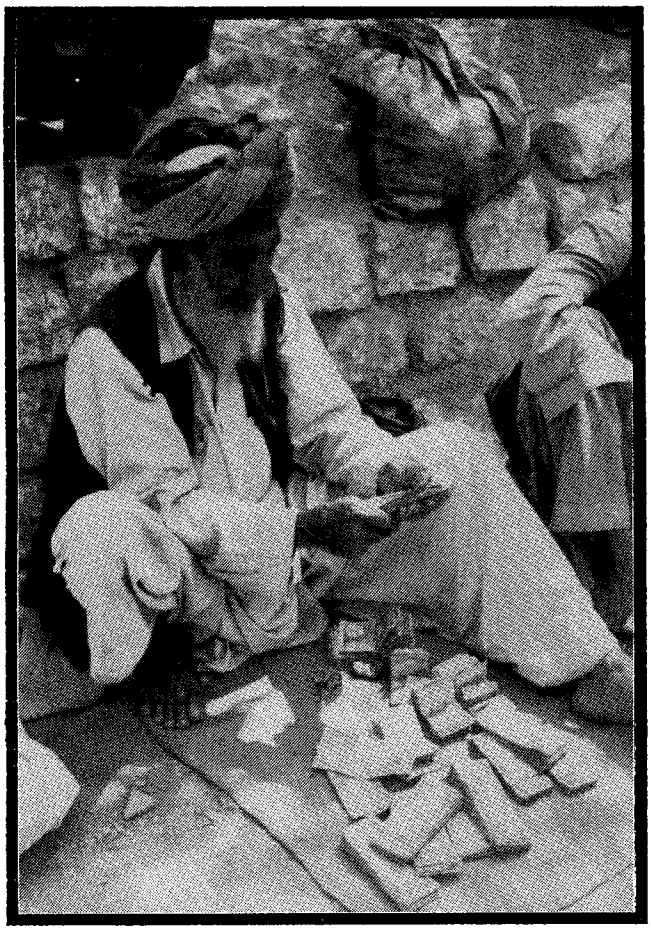


Remnants of refugee life: A truck loaded with tires, chickens, rope beds, and roof beams for the ride home to Afghanistan.

After 13 years of war, the Afghans are going home.

Since the collapse of the Communist government in Kabul last April, the trickle of people crossing the border has become a human tidal wave. As many as 15,000 people return each day to Afghanistan -- more than 600,000 since the beginning of the year. At the present rate, more than 1 million Afghans will go home by the end of August -- making this the largest voluntary repatriation movement since World War II.

Carol Rose is an ICWA fellow writing on Northwest and South Asia.



A money-changer buys Pakistani rupees and sells Afghan afghanis at Torkham.

For most Afghans, the long journey home is just the beginning of the struggle to rebuild their country and their lives.

"Ten days ago I went to check on my farm," says Noor Mohammed, a farmer from Konar province in eastern Afghanistan. "All the walls were destroyed by bombs and the fields were full of mines. I don't know how I am going to manage."

Despite the war-ravaged condition of his village, Noor Mohammed is taking 13 members of his extended family back with him. "Here the [United Nations food] rations have been cut and there are no jobs left," he says. "If we must be poor, at least we will be poor in our homeland."

Mass repatriation also has put a tremendous burden on agencies responsible for assisting refugees. "We are being stretched on all sides," says Robert Breen, repatriation officer for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). "There is a great deal of concern about the absorption capacity of Afghanistan's economy and agricultural land. If too many people return too quickly, many will face basic economic and social issues of survival."

DISAPPEARING IMAGES

Throughout Pakistan's frontier provinces there are signs that the refugees are leaving. Afghan restaurants are closing, rents are falling, diesel fuel is hard to find, and taxis seem to have disappeared -- often turning up later in Afghan towns.

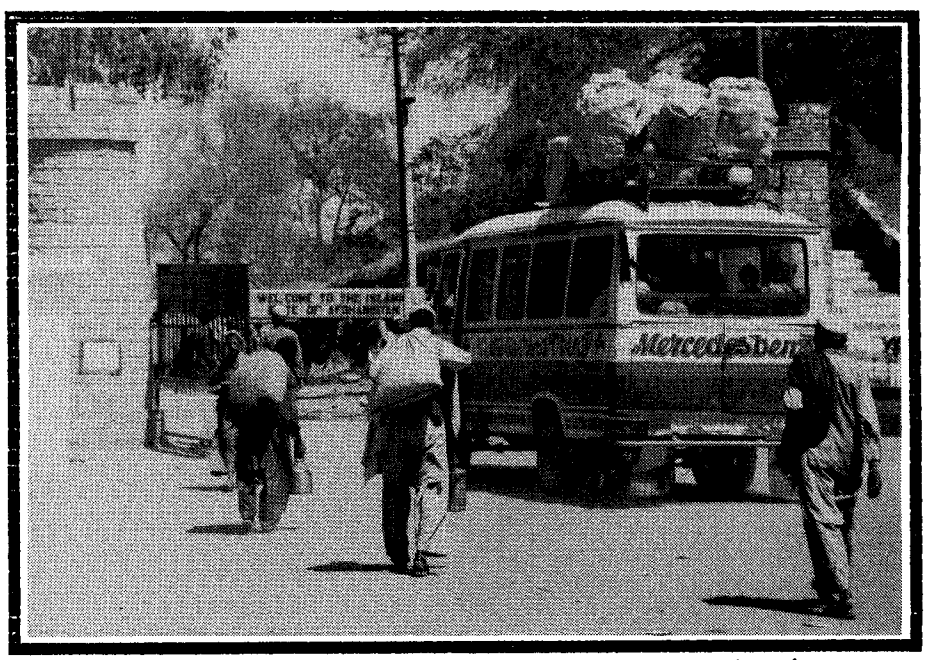
"Business is good," says a smiling money-changer, whose messengers bring him news of the latest currency values from New

York, London and Kabul. Wild fluctuations in the value of the afghani -- the currency of Afghanistan -- have led to fierce speculation, making some merchants wildly wealthy and leaving many amateur investors destitute.

But I am struck most by the abandoned refugee camps surrounding Peshawar. Driving through the Khorasan camp an hour north of town, I imagine this was how Dresden looked in 1945. Roofs have been torn off, windows and doors taken away, the walls are crumbling. Only rubble remains of the hundreds of refugee homes that stood here just two months ago.

Most residents of Khorasan were Uzbek and Turkoman from northern Afghanistan, who returned home soon after the mujahideen seized Kabul. Shops in the once-bustling Khorasan market are shut. The public water pumps have been torn out of the ground. At one end of the camp, men are loading three Bedford trucks with roof beams, beds and bricks which they will use to rebuild their homes in Afghanistan.

I go to a field where Uzbek riders once played *buzkashi*, a sort of horse-back rugby in which riders scrum over a dead goat instead of a ball. Hundreds of spectators used to crowd into mud bleachers to watch the game every Friday afternoon. Now the field is abandoned and the mud bleachers are eroding.



On foot and by mini-bus, refugees cross the border into Afghanistan.

Soon the rains will wash away all signs of the life that flourished here for more than a decade. The Afghans built their homes -- indeed their lives -- from the mud plains to which they were exiled. As they leave, the Earth seems to reclaim the desert as its own.

THE DELUGE

Hundreds of Afghan men crowd in front of the National Bank in the Pakistani village of Pabi, jostling one another as the doors to the bank shut for the day. In his hand, each man holds a ration card given to him when he registered with the Pakistani government as a refugee. The card entitles him to United Nations food rations each month.

Since July 1990, UNHCR has offered to pay 3,300 rupees ($132) and 300 kg of wheat to any refugee who turns in a ration card. The so-called "encashment" program is part of a UNHCR program to assist refugees who want to repatriate, putting money in their pockets in exchange for taking them off rations.

During the first year and a half of the program, around 46,000 families exchanged their ration cards for money and wheat. This year, at least that many people have encashed in just six

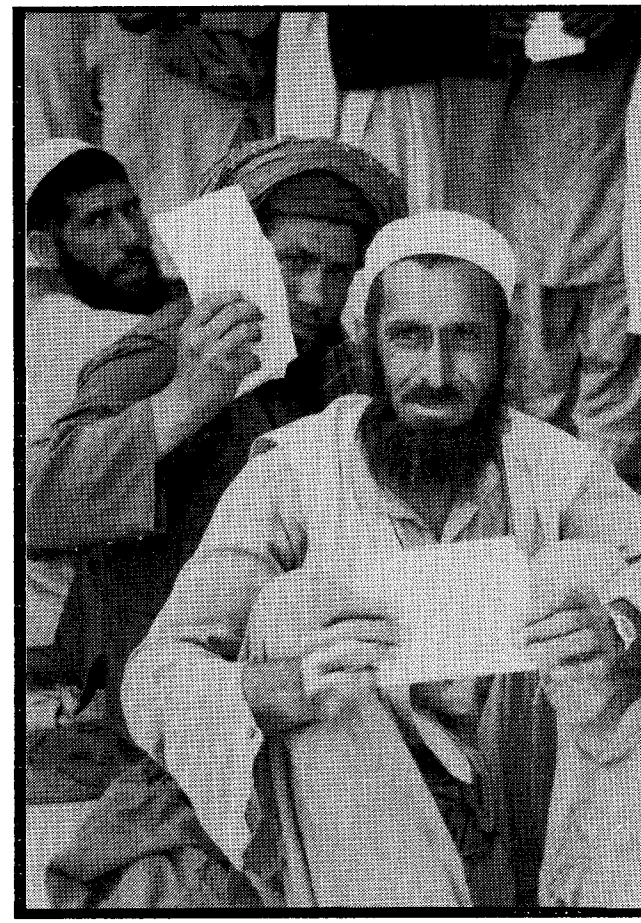
Afghan men sit outside of a UNHCR encashment center, holding the ration books they hope to exchange for $130 in cash.

months. The result has been near-riot situations and violent flare-ups at local banks where UNHCR staff have set up encashment centers.

"It is almost like there is a run on the banks," says Breen, the UNHCR repatriation officer. "We have run out of wheat for the last two weeks. And we constantly face the risk of running out of money."

So far, the UNHCR encashment offices have shut down at least three times because the money has ran out. The program currently spends nearly $2 million a week.

"The donors have been responsive and supportive, making pledges of money," Breen explains. "The problem is in delivering the money."

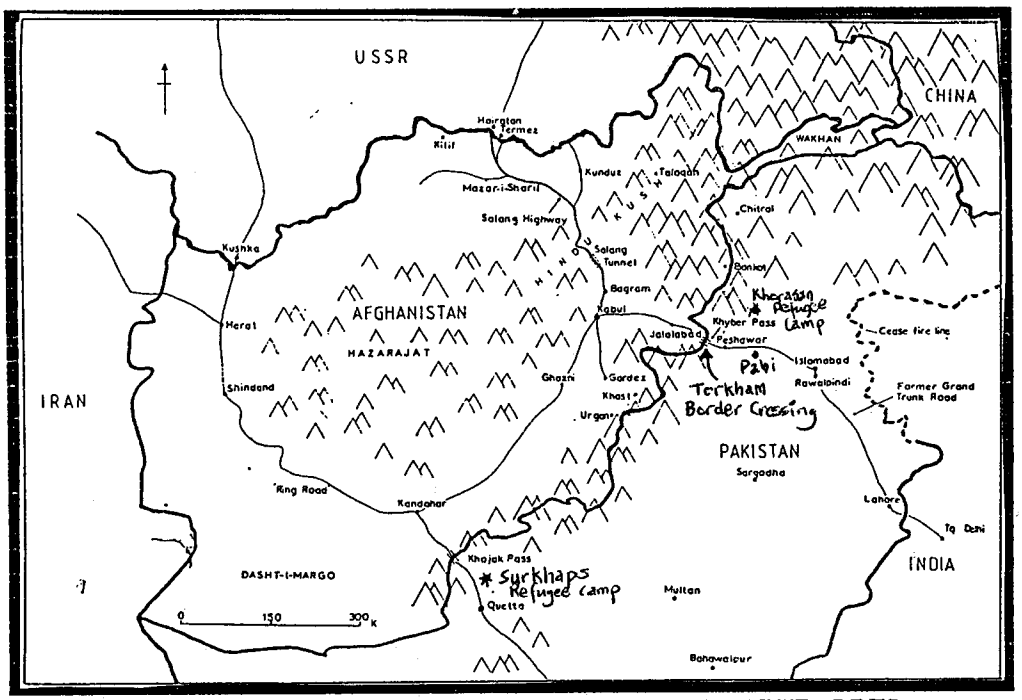


Proud holders of ration books wait to cash them in for $130 and a chance to go home.

Breen estimates that around 100,000 ration books have already been exchanged for cash, which leaves another 400,000 books yet to cash. The total estimated cost of the encashment program: $56 million -- only one-third of which has been received.

The encashment program is designed to help refugees pay for their transportation back to Afghanistan. But the cost of a single truck to Afghanistan is $150 to $300, depending on how far from the border people need to travel. Last month, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), signed a contract with UNHCR to assist in providing transportation back to Afghanistan for people who live in the remote northern regions of the country.

The encashment program does not help refugees who came to Pakistan after 1986, when Afghans were no longer registered or given ration cards. The United Nations estimates that there may



MAP OF THE AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN BORDER AREA

be more than 300,000 unregistered refugees, all of whom are left out of the encashment program. Nor is encashment money sufficient to cover the cost of basic rehabilitation in Afghanistan: rebuilding homes, repairing irrigation channels or clearing mine fields.

"The program is aimed at transportation in the recognition that the Afghans have had the freedom to go back and forth, to repair their land and to get income from their participation in the Pakistani economy," says Breen.

Despite the difficulties facing returning Afghans, there are no signs of forced repatriation -- unlike situations in Haiti, Vietnam, Burma and parts of Africa.

"The strongest indication that this is a voluntary return is the physical act of return," says Breen. "But back-flow could become an issue. If there is no economic revival in Afghanistan, many of these people will try to come back in the winter. But this time they won't be refugees fleeing persecution, but economic migrants. And the Government of Pakistan may close the border to them."

LIFE RETURNS TO AFGHANISTAN

In rural Afghanistan, villagers are getting down to the difficult work of rebuilding their lives: reconstructing homes destroyed in aerial bombing, clearing mines from their fields and digging irrigation channels.

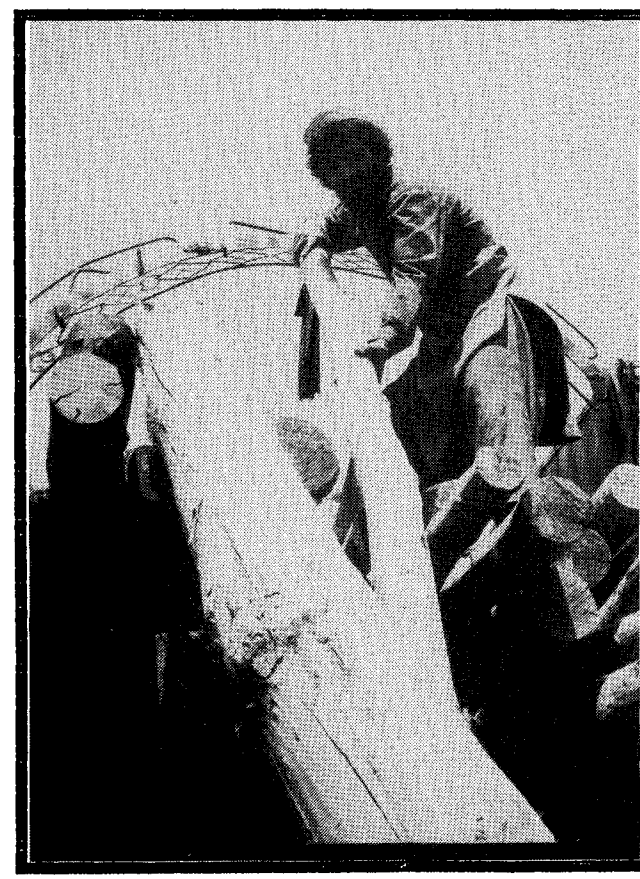
"In areas where there are no mines and there is water, you see a real resurgence of village life. There are animals, children are playing and men are working in the fields," says Tom Harrington, one of the few foreigners who has traveled extensively in Afghanistan's rural areas since the fall of the Communist government, working as a consultant and head of a United Nations "needs assessment" survey team for Afghanistan.

"You see functioning hand-pumps, water-driven flour mills busy grinding the recent harvest, fields that are green or recently harvested using tractors and oxen," says Harrington. "Afghan village life is returning, with a rhythm and beauty of its own."

But for many Afghans, life is far from normal.

"There is not one consistent image of what the countryside looks like right now; it varies from place to place," continues Harrington. "Some villages are unscathed while others are completely shattered, with no irrigation or water, houses that are destroyed and fields that are mined and haven't been cultivated for a decade.

"As you get close to cities that were held by the government, you see more areas that are completely leveled, wreckage of tanks and personnel carriers, dead trees and a look of utter hopelessness," he says. "In certain areas you can see

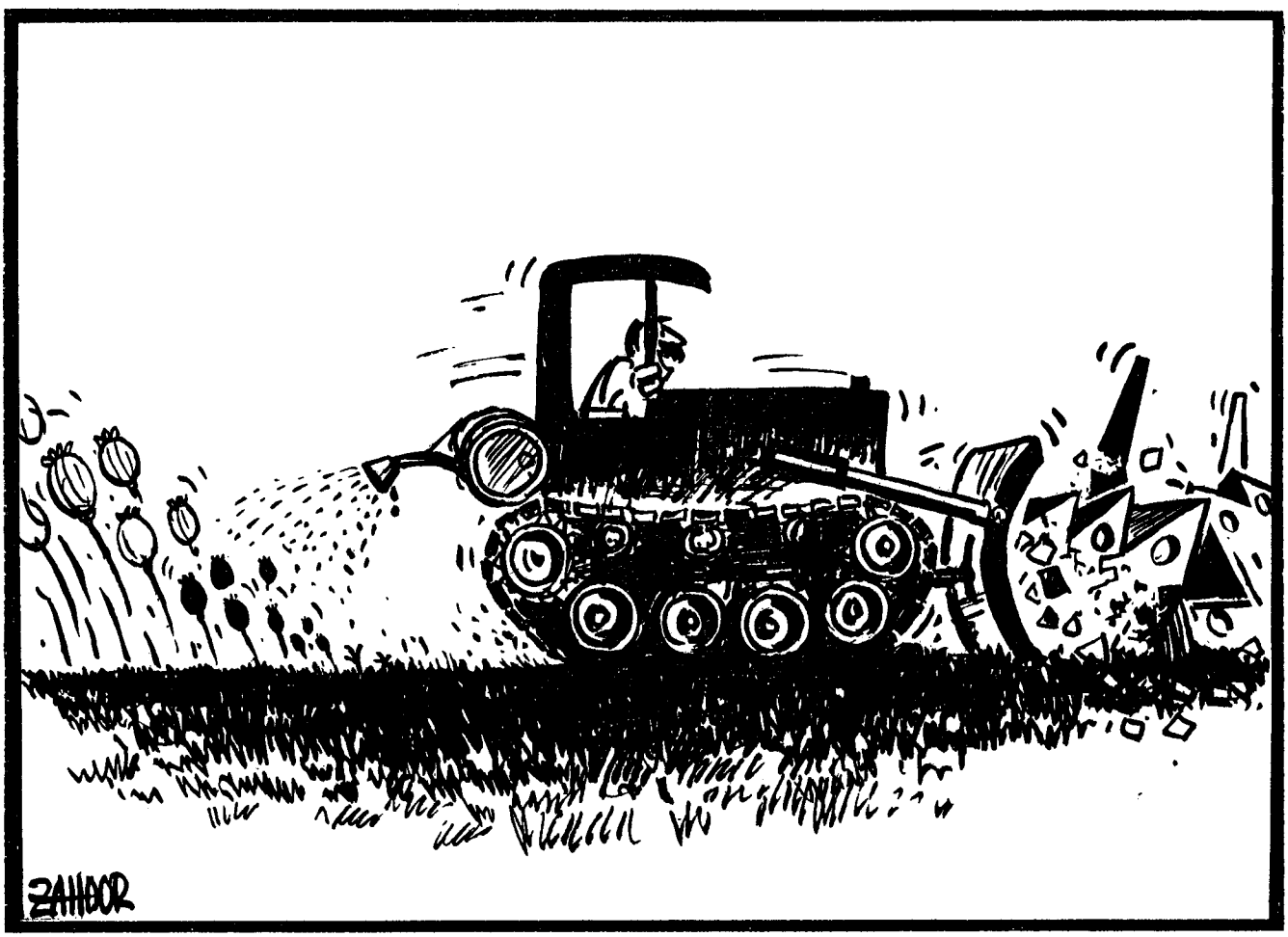


An Afghan loads wooden roofbeams on to a truck in preparation for the reconstruction of his home in Afghanistan.

mines, both the small grenade-shaped bomblets that were dropped from planes and the anti-personnel mines that are on stakes driven into the ground and set off by trip-wires."

There are an estimated 10 million mines in Afghanistan and the United Nations says that at least a quarter of a million people have been maimed by mines there in the last decade. In June of this year, at least 150 Afghans were admitted to Pakistani hospitals with mine injuries sustained while in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the $2 million pledged to the United nations for mine clearing will run out in August, forcing the program to shut down unless more money is forthcoming.

"De-mining and irrigation determine whether farmers can get back on their land and that, in turn, determines whether people



A cartoonist's interpretation of rehabilitation in Afghanistan: poppies may be the key harvest for returning farmers. (From the Frontier Post newspaper.)

can go back to their villages," says Harrington. "The Afghan people have the will to work and the courage to face the dangers, but they simply do not have the technical or financial resources to rebuild roads and bridges, clear mines or construct large irrigation in-take channels. These are massive public works projects that require money from the international community."

Obtaining sufficient funds to rebuild Afghanistan won't be easy. In June, UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali appealed for $180 million for humanitarian work in Afghanistan. So far, only $40 million has been received.

The U.S. Congress, meanwhile, has put limits on aid to Afghanistan until the U.S. Agency for International Development certifies that the Kabul government has taken steps to stop the drug trade. The sentiment is well-placed since Afghanistan recently surpassed Burma as the world's leading grower of poppies -- a plant used to make opium and heroin. The problem is that the government in Kabul is not in control of the countryside. Moreover, as long as there is no outside financial assistance, Afghan farmers will have little choice but to grow poppies in order to survive.

Zara War is a middle-aged Afghan from the eastern province of Nangarhar. Before the war he was a police officer and a farmer. Since coming to Pakistan ten years ago, he has worked for $15 a month breaking rocks for road construction. Now he can't find work so he is going home.

"My house [in Afghanistan] is destroyed, my fields are mined and my 10,000 grape vines have died," he says. "The only way I can afford to rebuild my house and feed my family is by farming poppies and hashish. I'm not selling it for heroin, but I need the money."

Another challenge for Afghanistan will be teaching a generation that has known only war to fight equally hard for peace.

"It will be a difficult transition for people who have spent ten years waging war," says Harrington. "A lot of young Afghan men whose identity is defined by carrying a weapon and being a warrior will find that without prospects for employment, they have no inclination to take up another life-style.

"I have seen villagers clearing a canal: five of them were digging with shovels and 15 of them were standing guard with automatic rifles," he adds. "Putting down a gun and taking up a hoe might not be as exciting. But the Afghans need to reverse those proportions."

A family loads bricks and a puppy on a truck for the return trip to Afghanistan.

KABUL IN CRISIS

While the Afghan countryside returns to normal, Kabul continues to be an island of confusion and chaos. For Ashola Arif, returning to his home in the Afghan capital wasn't at all what he expected.

"There is no work and no money for anyone to live," says the 25-year-old Arif. "Every 100 meters in Kabul a new party is in control. I stayed inside for three days as rockets fell all around our house. The shops in the bazaar are closed and the food is finished. A lot of people in Kabul are leaving."

Soon after the mujahideen seized power in Kabul, driving out the Communist government of Najib, the mujahideen started fighting one another.

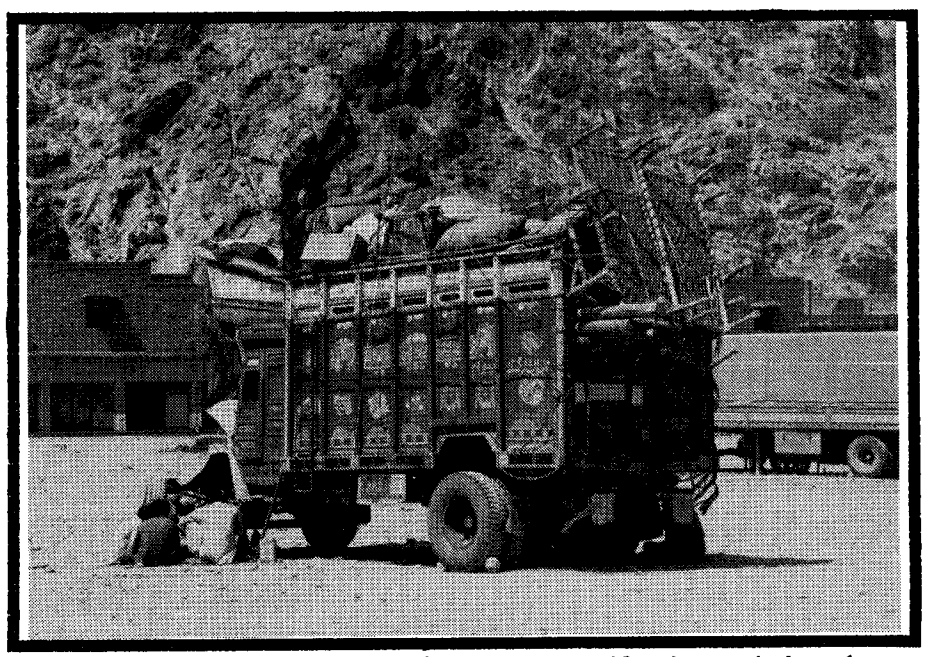
On one side of the internecine battle is the commander, Ahmad Shah Masood, a member of the minority Tajik ethnic group from northern Afghanistan. In order to seize Kabul, Masood joined forces with members of the former government militia, led by an Uzbek named Rashid Dostum. The militiamen are called "Gilam Jam" -- carpet thieves -- for their tendency to loot with such abandon that they steal even the carpets. With more than

160,000 men, the militia is the largest and most heavily armed fighting force in Afghanistan.

Leading the opposition to the Masood-Dostum alliance is the Hezb-i-Islami party of Gulbadin Hekmatyar. Representing the majority Pushtun population of Afghanistan, Hekmatyar has called for the ouster of the Gilam Jam from Kabul -- an impossible demand given the militia's fighting strength. Hekmatyar remains on the outskirts of Kabul, exchanging rocket fire with the militia in skirmishes that have killed scores of Afghan civilians in the city.

Mujahideen and militiamen also have attacked many of the 50,000 Hindu and Sikh families who have lived in Afghanistan for decades, most working as shopkeepers or money-lenders. According to the BBC, 60 percent of the Hindu and Sikh population of Kabul has fled, saying "the Mujahideen abducted their women and looted their homes." The United Nations also is confronting an influx of former Communist government officials from Afghanistan who are seeking asylum in Pakistan or abroad.

In addition to ethnic power struggles and attacks on religious minorities, pitched street battles have broken out between groups representing the Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims.



A garishly-painted and heavily-laden Bedford truck breaks down on the road to Afghanistan.

"For the last three days, the [mostly Sunni] Pushtuns and the Shias have been fighting on the street," says Arif. "Everyone who walks outside risks having his party card checked. If you are a Shia, then the Pushtuns arrest you. If you are a Pushtun, then the Shia's arrest you. They have taken 1,500 people in just four days in order to make a trade later."

Shaking his head, he adds: "I think it has something to do with getting seats in the new government."

Many Afghans say it doesn't matter who runs Kabul, as long as it is an Islamic government.

"We don't want a strong government in Kabul," says Awal Khan, age 35, a farmer who is preparing to take his family back with him to Paktia province in eastern Afghanistan. "We have made our own *shura* [council of elders] in the village and we have peace. We didn't need the Communists and we don't need the central government now in Kabul."

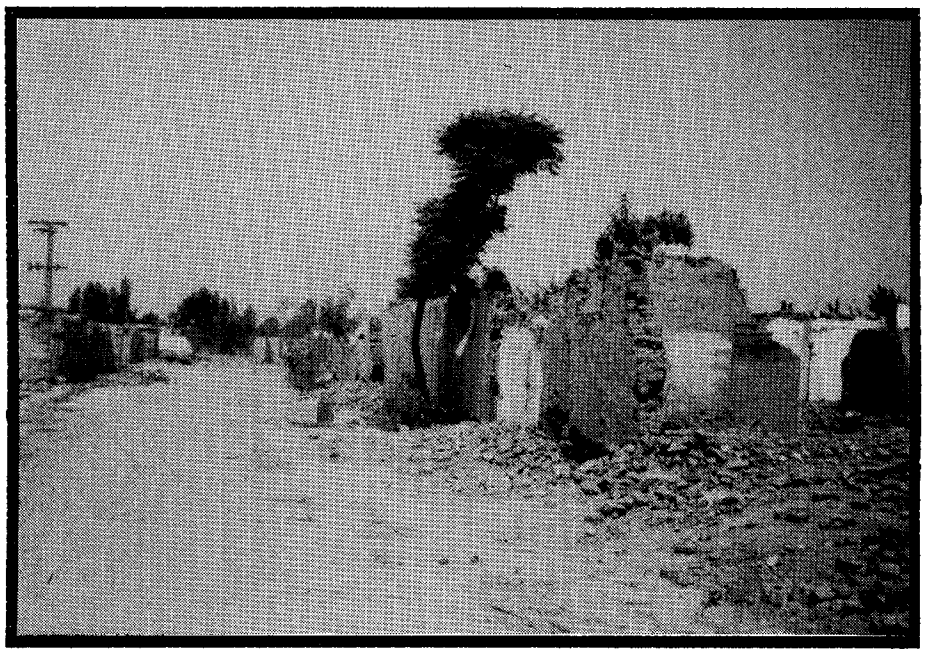
While the emotional resentment to Kabul is deeply rooted in Afghan history, there is no question that Kabul plays an important role in reconstruction. A unified central government is necessary to negotiate for foreign assistance, investment and trade. As long as fighting in Kabul continues, Afghanistan also will have difficulty attracting professionals, technicians and civil servants needed to run the country.

THE FORSAKEN

Amid the rubble of abandoned houses of the Surkhaps refugee camp stands a single mud-wall compound. I have come to this distant camp in the middle of the Baluchistan desert to see what has become of my friend, Somargul, the eldest sister in an Afghan family with whom I lived in *purdah* -- seclusion -- one year ago (See CVR-16).

As before, I have come here in disguise: wearing an all-encompassing body veil (*burqa*) to avoid detection by Pakistani police. Because of frequent tribal clashes, foreigners are not allowed into this camp.

As a taxi ferries me through the five-mile long central bazaar of the camp, I peer through the lace eye-covering of my *burqa* at the deserted shops and homes. It appears that the refugees left in waves: some stretches of the camp are completely abandoned while others remain full of people. As we near Somargul's house, I see that her family compound is the only one still standing in the neighborhood.



The abandoned streets of the Khorason refugee camp.

When I entered the inner courtyard, Somargul and her sisters embrace me and usher me to the central salon. As before, children gather round to see my face as I lift my veil. I distribute gifts -- coloring books, scarves, chocolates -- while Somargul tells me of her life since the fall of Kabul.

"Everyone has left the camp," she says. "Our neighbors were all from the same village, so they left together. We are the only people left in this area so we must travel [three hours] to Quetta to buy meat or vegetables. It's a big problem because it is almost impossible to find taxis to come here anymore so the men have to walk a long way just to get transportation.

"It also has become dangerous for us to stay here," she continues. "But we went back to see our home in Kandahar [Afghanistan] and it is completely destroyed and our fields are mined. There is no place for us to live if we return there. We also looked for a house in Quetta, but it is too expensive for us to move there."

Somargul says her family has two ration cards but that when they tried to encash them they were turned away because of the crowds. Since it costs money to go to the encashment center in the nearest town, they gave up trying.

Instead, Somargul asks if I can help one of her brothers

Only rubble remains where houses stood three months ago.

find a job with a western aid agency. With cutbacks in international assistance programs, however, jobs for Afghans are becoming more scarce even as the need increases.

"Please won't you help us?" she says. "It is not safe for us to stay here, but we cannot afford to leave."

The same plea is made by a refugee family with whom I meet in the Khorasan refugee camp, north of Peshawar. As I tour the nearly empty camp, a man invites me inside to have tea with the women in his family. Inside the *purdah* compound, beds and blankets are stacked in preparation for imminent departure.

"The water has gone bad here so we will have to leave soon," says one of the women as she offers me a cup of sweetened green tea. "What are we to do? Our house in Afghanistan has been bombed and we haven't enough money to transport roof beams on a truck to Afghanistan. But it is too dangerous for us to stay here. There are only five or six families left and the thieves come in the night."

Another woman introduces me to her twelve-year-old son, asking me to read some medical test results that say the boy has epilepsy.

"There is no medicine in Afghanistan," says his mother. "Do

you think we can we take him back with us?"

Cecilia Ryberg is a social service officer who has worked for three years on a joint assignment with UNHCR and Swedish Save the Children. One of her concerns is the plight of Afghans who will not -- or cannot -- go home.

"Some people have made the choice not to go back now, to wait and see how the government turns out. But there is a second group of people who are desperate to leave now and are panicking because they see the people around them going back but they cannot afford to leave," says Ryberg.

"When people leave they are taking the taps with them, dismantling wells and demolishing houses," she says. "It is obvious to those still here that they are being left behind."

Many of those who cannot return fear they will lose their land to Afghans who beat them to it. Others will simply find it increasingly difficult to survive in Pakistan as rations are cut, aid agencies move to Kabul and jobs disappear.

"We are finding new vulnerable populations emerging who were not at risk before," says Ryberg. "There will be widows who refuse remarriage [to their dead husband's brother in accordance with Islamic law] and people who previously were supported by their tribes and now are abandoned. And, of course, there are the sick and disabled who have come to rely on medical care in Pakistan."

Ryberg predicts that the traditional tribal structures that led to sharing of rations and living space may be weakened in the economic crunch facing returning families.

"I think we will see people becoming more keen on who is actually a part of the family and who is not," she says.

So far, the United Nations and Government of Pakistan have given no extra assistance to these at-risk refugees. Nor are there plans at this time to move refugees into central camps, where services could be streamlined and families would be less vulnerable to attack by bandits.

"No one wants to spend money on moving refugees into new camps," says a UNHCR official in Quetta. "If they spend money to move them, they want to move them back to Afghanistan."

Meantime, UNHCR continues to provide basic services -- water and basic health units -- in most camps. Says Ryberg: "To cut this off would be the same as forced repatriation."

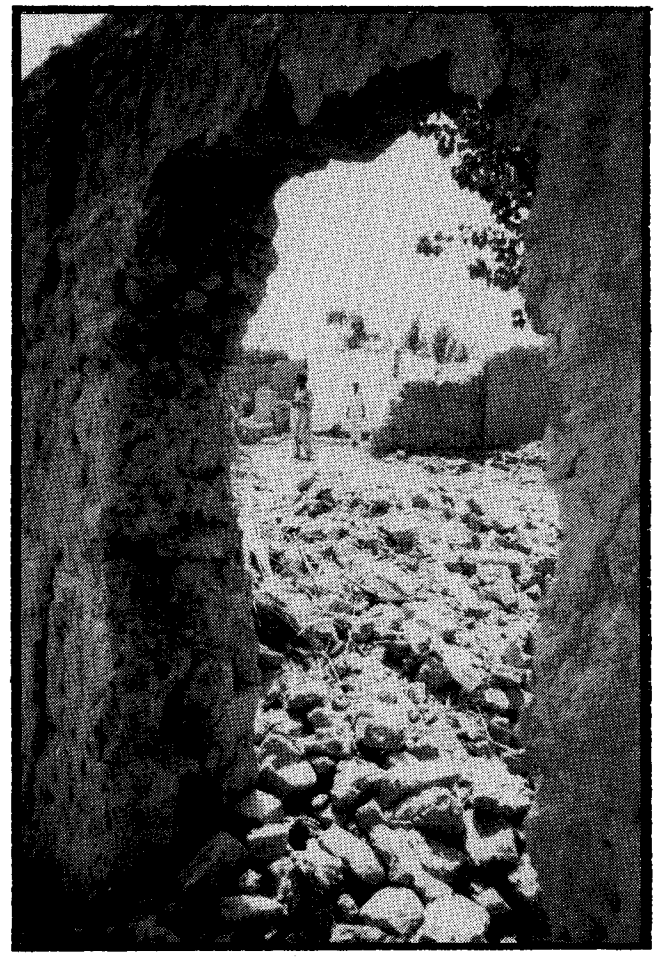
Long-scheduled reductions in rations of wheat, edible oil and kerosene have been interpreted by many refugees as a sign that they are no longer welcome to stay in Pakistan. Moreover, pressure on the UN and government to assist returning refugees has diverted manpower and money away from those still in the camp.

"We are pulling our staff into encashment so we are not on top of everything that is happening in the camps," says Breen. "A break in the water supply may take a week to repair, so the refugees think we are cutting off water. Any change in the routine is interpreted as a change in policy."

Nonetheless, says Ryberg, it is too early to provide additional financial assistance to Afghans who are left behind.

"If we try to assist the vulnerable groups at this time, the wealthy people will sneak the aid," she says. "The local Malik [council leader] will select his wife and sister-in-law as the most needy. We need time to let the situation stabilize and take count of what needs to be done. At the same time, we must begin developing a contingency plan involving vulnerable groups.

"But that is a decision requiring coordination between all UN agencies and must be taken at higher levels within the United Nations," she adds. "Whatever we do, it must be coordinated with what is happening on the other side of the border."



Peering through the rubble in the Khorasan refugee camp.

Photos by C. Rose

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