



BY JAMES RUPERT FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Afghan farmer holds "butterfly" mine dropped on his village last year.

Depopulation Campaign Brutally Changes Villages

Fourth of five articles

By James Rupert
Special to The Washington Post

BARAKAT, Afghanistan—Surrounded by rocky, snow-covered hills, this village is a man-made oasis.

Like all villages here in the harsh, dry lands of Ghazni Province, Barakat was founded around a reliable water source, and generations of villagers have slowly carved its sun-hardened hillsides into green fields and orchards. A villager insists that no one wants to leave Barakat. In Persian its very name means "Blessing."

But of about 1,500 residents before the war, villagers say between 150 and 200 have been killed. And with the fighting here getting worse, about a quarter of the families have fled to Pakistan, Kabul or to the villages of relatives.

During a month-long tour through southeastern Afghanistan, I found that the story varied in each village, but the general pattern was clear. Direct attacks on villages by the Soviet Army and Air Force, often assisted by Afghan government troops, are expelling farmers and shepherds who support the

AFGHANISTAN

THE NEW BATTLEFIELDS

mujaheddin—the Afghan resistance fighters.

"The Soviets know the mujaheddin need the villages," one Afghan told me. "They want to kill the fish by emptying the water."

This remains a hidden war. With journalists legally barred from entering Afghanistan, it is

impossible to be certain about most of what is happening here. But everyone—the Soviet authorities, the Afghan resistance leaders and the villagers of Barakat—agrees that the war and the suffering are growing.

In large areas of Afghanistan, the Soviets and the mujaheddin are fighting a new kind of battle in the countryside. It is not a battle for physical control of villages, but a battle over whether villages shall continue to exist.

"This is genocide," said Michael Barry, an American scholar and human rights researcher who visits Afghanistan regularly. Barry and others worry that the widespread destruction of farms—plus three years of poor rainfall in much of Afghanistan—not only have forced out much of the population, but now threaten famine for those who remain.

Those who have left—nearly a third of Afghanistan's 16 million people—now live in teeming refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran. There, Afghan specialists say, their new environment already is changing Afghan society as a whole in ways that could lead to further instability in the region.

Whatever its ultimate effects on Afghan society, it was clear in the villages that the depopulation campaign has brutally changed the lives of individual Afghans.

In Barakat, "the Soviets bring jets, because they know we help the mujaheddin," Bismullah Kheir Mohammed, a resident, said. In October, the Soviets and Afghan Army troops staged a four-day sweep through Barakat and nearby villages, killing 20 people and taking 12 young men to serve in the Afghan Army, villagers said.

The villagers said the Soviets had entered the nearby hamlet of Gabrubr and killed Abdul Gul, 55, and Niaz Gul, 70. "They were just farmers," Bismullah said, "and they took their money from the house to keep the Soviets from stealing it."

"When the Soviets searched them and found the money, they stole it and strangled them. We found their bodies two days later, when the Soviets left," he said.

A young man from nearby Bedmoshk told a horrifying tale of Soviets who held a 14-year-old boy and slowly killed him when his parents would not pay a ransom. "They tied him to a tree and beat him and stabbed him with a bayonet," the man said. "Finally they shot him."

Four members of the International Humanitarian Inquiry Commission visited Bedmoshk two days later and said they confirmed the torture and killing of the boy, among other atrocities in the area.

"Even one bomb here is a disaster," said a young guerrilla, himself a farmer in Barakat. "It takes more than a month just to repair a bomb crater in a field. But these killings, for no reason, are the actions of animals. Who can know why they do such things?"

For the people of Pirangai, in Paktia Province, the horror of the war has come from bombings. In early November, they said, a Soviet jet thundered overhead and dropped two big canisters that exploded in midair.

The canisters scattered hundreds of small "butterfly" antipersonnel mines over the village, some of which were still there when I visited.

"We have heard about Soviet bombs that look like watches or toys," Sahab Gul, a shopkeeper, said. "So we always tell the children not to pick up strange objects."

Continued

Three children had hands or feet blown off by the butterfly mines, which are designed to maim rather than kill. A young boy, Wali Khan, said his grandfather had taken his 11-year-old cousin to doctors in Pakistan after the boy lost a hand and part of his face while examining one of the mines.

"We are ready to fight them if they come to us," said Gul, his voice quivering with anger. "But they want to make us leave by injuring our children." Few in the village have left, he said.

Invoking an Islamic conviction, he said: "It is better to be tortured in the jihad [holy war] and go to paradise than to live with our bodies ruined like this."

Leaving for Pakistan

Of 32 villages I saw during my trip, none was untouched by the war. But even where villagers have recovered from such attacks, their lives remain difficult, and abandoning their homes for the relative safety of Pakistan remains a much discussed option.

Three years of meager rain and snowfall have dried up the weaker water sources in this and other regions of Afghanistan, leaving downstream villages in a virtual state of drought. Swedish doctor Johan Langerfelt, a member of the Humanitarian Inquiry Commission mission, said the group's four-week study last fall showed that irrigated farming production in Wardak, Ghazni and Logar provinces had dropped by as much as 80 percent. He suggested that only heavy snowfall this winter would avert famine in 1986.

An Afghan agronomist who surveyed much of southern Wardak Province last fall said he had found 70 percent of families living on bread and tea. "They are not even consuming sugar, which is a sign of extreme distress," he said.

In what many specialists regard as a "prefamine" development, families have sold or slaughtered much of their livestock, which they could no longer afford to feed.

Even in the villages that have not been abandoned, most young men have left, making farming even more difficult. "It is dangerous for young men to stay," a village elder in southern Wardak said. "The Soviets may come and kill them or take them for the Army."

Many families have sent some of their sons to fight from nearby guerrilla bases and sent others to Pakistan or Iran to find jobs that will bring the family needed cash. Old men once retired from farming have gone back to work, tending as much of the land as they can.

The Soviet campaign to empty the villages has been uneven, but most intensive in Afghanistan's eastern half, according to Barry, who has researched the issue for human rights organizations and led the fall Humanitarian Inquiry Commission mission.

Barry said the Soviets systematically have created broad free-fire zones along the country's most strategic road, which arcs from Mazar-i-Sharif in the north through Kabul, to Kandahar in the south.

The Soviets have also depopulated areas along important resistance supply routes.

Following a resistance supply trail from Pakistan, my guerrilla escort and I crossed one such region, the plain of Zermat, south of Gardez.

Hiking all night to avoid helicopter attack on the exposed plain, we walked through the abandoned ruins of a dozen villages. Moonlight shone through the shell-shattered walls of homes and mosques, and we had to watch our step to avoid falling into craters left where bombs had collapsed the underground irrigation system on which the region's fragile farm economy depends.

Amid the devastation, a few families stubbornly had refused to leave. Mohammed, a farmer and a resistance fighter, described how he and a few others farmed under cover of night to keep food and shelter available for guerrilla caravans passing through.

"The Soviets have done everything they could" to force the villagers out, he said. "Their helicopters shoot anything that moves—even a farmer hoeing his field or an animal grazing."

"If I could, I would go tomorrow to Pakistan like the others," Mohammed said, "but we must stay for the jihad."

Barry stresses the drastic scale of the depopulation of Afghanistan. His census last fall of 23 villages in southeastern Afghanistan showed that 56 percent of the households had been abandoned.

The Pakistani and Iranian governments estimate that about 4.5 million Afghans have sought refuge in their countries, a figure Barry compares to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees' estimate of 10 million refugees worldwide. His voice rising, he asked, "Why don't people in North America pay more attention to this?"

The Lasting Scar

In the single room of a trailside teahouse crowded with mujaheddin, a French medical team of three women examined Hakam Khan. In the yellow glow of a kerosene lamp, a surgical scar, improperly healed, snaked across his stomach like a shallow trench.

Answering the doctor's questions, Hakam Khan explained that he had no idea what surgery had been performed on him when he went to a Kabul hospital last year with stomach pain. Now he was having trouble with the scar, and the French doctors, he said, were the only people around to ask for help.

The women had hiked 12 hours that day, crossing a mountain range. As soon as they had collapsed on the floor of the teahouse, mujaheddin had begun presenting their medical problems.

"It's always like this," Dr. Louise-Marie de la Mata said with a sigh.

In Wardak, as elsewhere in Afghanistan, it is only small groups of overworked French doctors who provide medical care for local residents. For resistance commander Amin Wardak, the volunteer doctors and their tiny hospital—sent by the Paris-based Doctors of the World organization—are a critical part of the battle to prevent the depopulation of the province.

Wardak's fledgling civil administration also runs schools and aids farmers.

"It is especially important to keep prices down," he emphasized. "We have arrested many government agents who came to the countryside to buy up animals and foodstocks at high prices—all to empty the countryside of food."

Wardak and other commanders established rules to prevent speculation in limited food supplies and are looking for ways to improve production. A beginning agricultural development program involves an experimental farm testing new strains of wheat.

But the most significant factor keeping people in the villages in southern Wardak is that the Soviets have not applied the same degree of pressure as elsewhere. Without effective anti-aircraft weapons, Wardak—like any commander—is unable to protect even remote villages from Soviet attack.

Continued

According to Barry, the lack of air defenses places Afghanistan's resistance commanders in a dilemma: "Either they can fight and eventually lose their populations, or they can keep their populations, but by not fighting in that area."

Forging Sense of Nationality

To the casual observer driving on the back roads of Pakistan near the Afghan border, it can be difficult to tell the better-established refugee camps from Pakistani villages. Both are built of mud bricks, using precious timber only as roof beams, and the people look much alike: turbaned men, and women draped in sheet-like *burkas*, with lace-covered "windows" for vision.

The difference is that the refugee camps are larger, often holding as many as 20,000 to 30,000 people. Many observers believe that this unprecedented concentration of Afghans, often including different ethnic groups—Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and others—is helping to spawn a sense of national identity.

"When these camps first began springing up, even before the Soviet invasion, Afghans from different tribes and regions began to get acquainted," Prof. Rasul Amin, formerly of Kabul University's social sciences faculty, said. "Now we've even begun to see some of them intermarry."

The mixing of ethnic groups remains limited, according to Amin, because many camps are homogeneous, often with the populations of entire villages having moved intact to a single refugee camp.

At Kacha Gari, a large camp near Peshawar, refugees spoke about how their lives have changed.

"Here, there are so many children in school," one man said. How many, he was asked—75, 80 percent?

He frowned. "No, not like that. Maybe one in four," he said.

Stephen Keller, an American professor who runs an education program for Afghans in Peshawar, said most of the few refugee children in school study for only about three years. He and many educated Afghans said that most average Afghans retain a long-standing indifference toward education—a sentiment that hardened into antipathy during 1978 and 1979, when Afghanistan's first communist ruler, Nour Mohammed Taraki, tried to enforce literacy classes and lessons in Marxism on the population.

Keller insisted, though, that even the limited spread of education among Afghan refugees represents an important change.

"To get an idea of where these people started, you just have to see that before the war, only 7 percent of rural Afghan men could read, and only 2 percent of women," he said, "and most of them were government functionaries."

The Afghan guerrilla war against Communist rule began in 1978, and the first refugees began gathering in Pakistan within months. Such long-term refugees, living in older camps such as Kacha Gari, chafe at their dependence and idleness over the years.

"This is not life; this is only passing the time," said Mohammed Yussuf, a middle-aged former farmer, of his seven years as a refugee. "Before, when I owned my land, I was independent. Now I can only find a little work as a butcher. We get rations from the camp, but no one wants to live that way."

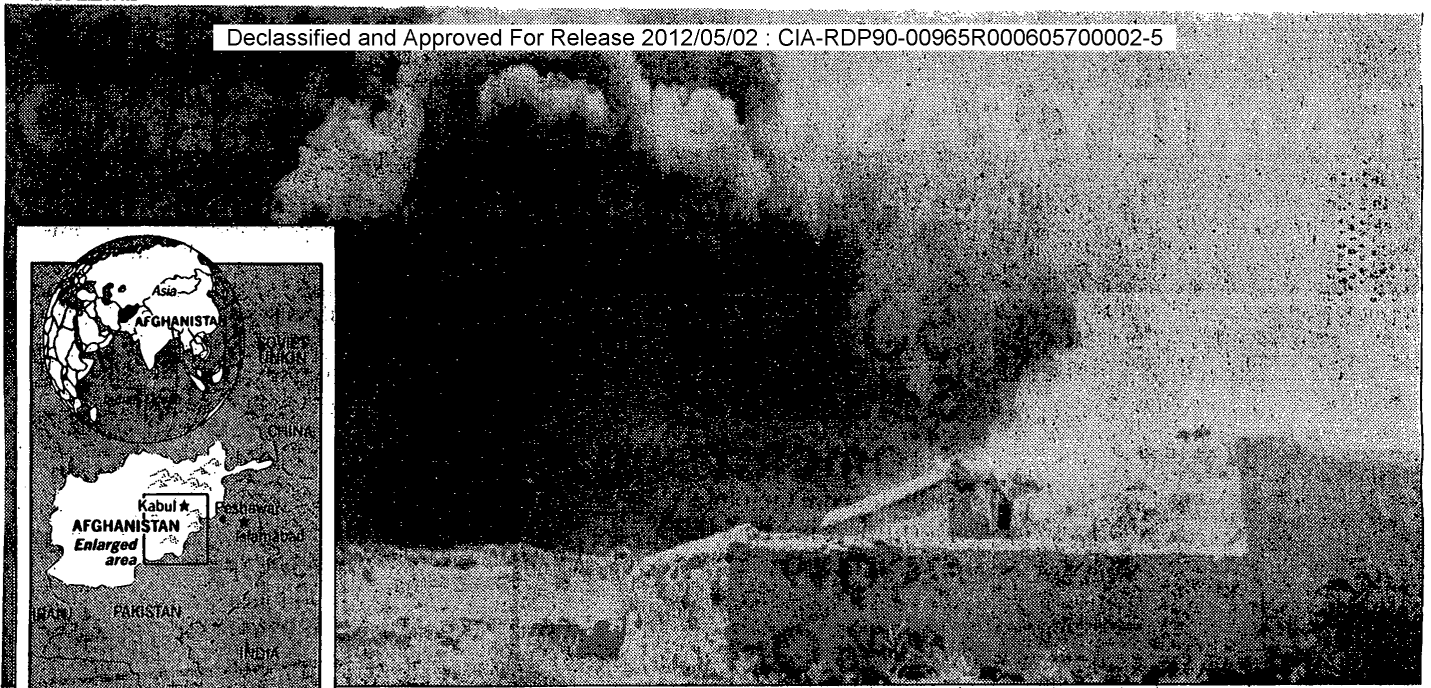
For Keller and other observers, the frustrations of this growing refugee population—the world's largest—represent a potential threat to stability in the border area of Pakistan. "Whether they are educated or not, there is no future for the rising generation, either within the camps or in Pakistan," Keller said.

Barry said he believes the camps favor the growth of Islamic fundamentalism among Afghans. "Fundamentalism is the wave of the future in Pakistan, and the choices made by the Pakistani establishment weigh heavily on the options available to the resistance parties," he said.

Barry warned that a sense of despair within the camps could embitter young Afghans, leading them to turn to terrorism. "I think we're going to see a Palestinianization of the Afghans," he said.

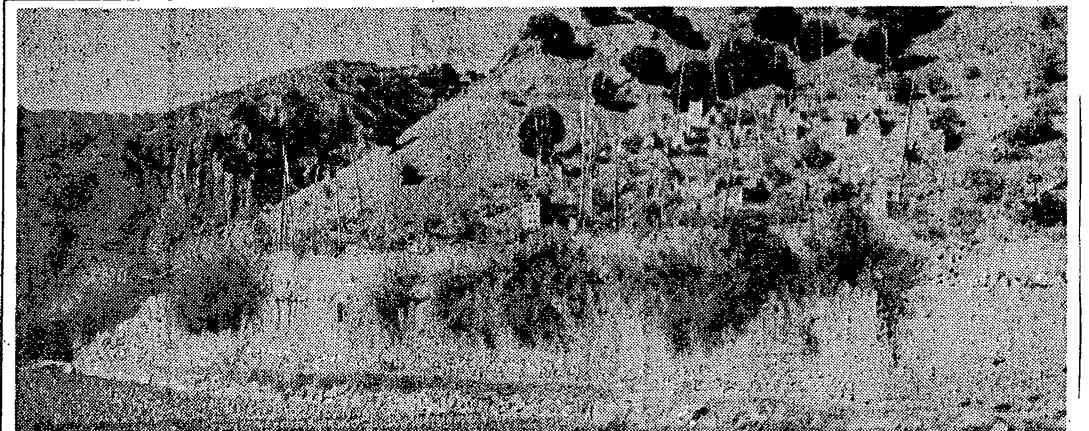
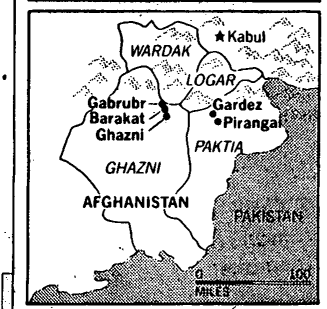
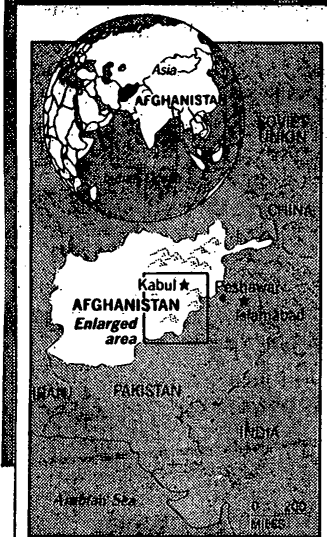
Next: Aid to the Afghan guerrillas

Continued



CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

A dense cloud of smoke and dust rises from a village in Afghanistan during a bombing raid by a Soviet SU24 jet in September 1984.



A cemetery beside a supply trail of the resistance forces in Paktia Province marks the site of a Soviet air raid more than a year ago.

Continued



Two boys, above, stand in rubble of their Barakat home, bombed by Soviets. Left, Bismullah Kheir Mohammed shows fragments of Soviet bomb that cratered his now-abandoned farm.

