

Return to Kandahar



R O B E R T F I S K

ColdType

Return to Kandahar

To mark the first anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon and the subsequent US-led 'war on terror,' Robert Fisk, the award-winning Middle East correspondent of London's Independent newspaper returned to Afghanistan where he wrote a series of scathing essays on a bombing offensive aimed at ridding the country of its Taliban rulers and Osama bin Laden's al-Qa'ida leaders

ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Copyright Robert Fisk.

Published by ColdType magazine at www.coldtype.net

Cover photo: Jack Dabaghian, Reuters

Designed by Tony Sutton, News Design Associates, Inc.,

November 2002

(Originally published in The Independent, August 2002)

PART ONE

Collateral damage

President George Bush's "war on terror" reached the desert village of Hajibirgit at midnight on 22 May. Haji Birgit Khan, the bearded, 85-year-old Pushtu village leader and head of 12,000 local tribal families, was lying on a patch of grass outside his home. Faqir Mohamed was sleeping among his sheep and goats in a patch of sand to the south when he heard "big planes moving in the sky". Even at night,

« ROBERT FISK / RETURN TO KANDAHAR »»

it is so hot that many villagers spend the hours of darkness outside their homes, although Mohamedin and his family were in their mud-walled house. There were 105 families in Hajibirgit on 22 May, and all were woken by the thunder of helicopter engines and the thwack of rotor blades and the screaming voices of the Americans.

Haji Birgit Khan was seen running stiffly from his little lawn towards the white-walled village mosque, a rectangular cement building with a single loudspeaker and a few threadbare carpets. Several armed men were seen running after him. Hakim, one of the animal herders, saw the men from the helicopters chase the old man into the mosque and heard a burst of gunfire. "When our people found him, he had been killed with a bullet, in the head," he says, pointing downwards. There is a single bullet hole in the concrete floor of the mosque and a dried bloodstain beside it. "We found bits of his brain on the wall."

Across the village, sharp explosions were detonating in the courtyards and doorways of the little homes. "The Americans were throwing stun grenades at us and smoke grenades," Mohamedin recalls. "They were throwing dozens of them at us and they were shouting and screaming all the time. We didn't understand their language, but there were Afghan gunmen with them, too, Afghans with blackened faces. Several began to tie up our women – our own women – and the Americans were lifting their burqas, their covering, to look at their faces. That's when the little girl was seen running away." Abdul Satar says that she was three years old, that she ran shrieking in fear from her home, that her name was Zarguna, the daughter of a man called Abdul-Shakour – many Afghans have only one name – and that someone saw her topple into the village's 60ft well on the other side of the mosque. During the night, she was to drown there, alone, her back apparently broken by the fall. Other village children would find her body in the morning. The Americans paid no attention. From the description of their clothes given by the villagers, they appeared to include Special Forces and also units of Afghan Special Forces, the brutish and ill-disciplined units run from Kabul's former Khad secret police headquarters. There were also 150 soldiers from the US 101st Airborne, whose home base is at Fort Campbell in Kentucky. But Fort Campbell is a long way from Hajibirgit, which is 50 miles into the desert from the south-western city of Kandahar. And the Americans were obsessed with one idea: that the village contained leaders from the Taliban and Osama bin Laden's al-Qa'ida movement.

A former member of a Special Forces unit from one of America's coalition

« ROBERT FISK / RETURN TO KANDAHAR »

partners supplied his own explanation for the American behaviour when I met him a few days later. “When we go into a village and see a farmer with a beard, we see an Afghan farmer with a beard,” he said. “When the Americans go into a village and see a farmer with a beard, they see Osama bin Laden.”

All the women and children were ordered to gather at one end of Hajibirgit. “They were pushing us and shoving us out of our homes,” Mohamedin says. “Some of the Afghan gunmen were shouting abuse at us. All the while, they were throwing grenades at our homes.” The few villagers who managed to run away collected the stun grenades next day with the help of children. There are dozens of them, small cylindrical green pots with names and codes stamped on the side. One says “7 BANG Delay: 1.5 secs NIC-01/06-07”, another “1 BANG, 170 dB Delay: 1.5s.” Another cylinder is marked: “DELAY Verzagerung ca. 1.5s.” These were the grenades that terrified Zarguna and ultimately caused her death. A regular part of US Special Forces equipment, they are manufactured in Germany by the Hamburg firm of Nico-Pyrotechnik – hence the “NIC” on several of the cylinders. “dB” stands for decibels.

Several date stamps show that the grenades were made as recently as last March. The German company refers to them officially as “40mm by 46mm sound and flash (stun) cartridges”. But the Americans were also firing bullets. Several peppered a wrecked car in which another villager, a taxi driver called Abdullah, had been sleeping. He was badly wounded. So was Haji Birgit Khan’s son.

A US military spokesman would claim later that US soldiers had “come under fire” in the village and had killed one man and wounded two “suspected Taliban or al-Qa’ida members”. The implication – that 85-year-old Haji Birgit Khan was the gunman – is clearly preposterous.

The two wounded were presumably Khan’s son and Abdullah, the taxi driver. The US claim that they were Taliban or al-Qa’ida members was a palpable lie – since both of them were subsequently released. “Some of the Afghans whom the Americans brought with them were shouting ‘Shut up!’ to the children who were crying,” Faqir Mohamed remembers.

“They made us lie down and put cuffs on our wrists, sort of plastic cuffs. The more we pulled on them, the tighter they got and the more they hurt. Then they blindfolded us. Then they started pushing us towards the planes, punching us as we tried to walk.”

In all, the Americans herded 55 of the village men, blindfolded and with their hands tied, on to their helicopters. Mohamedin was among them. So was

« ROBERT FISK / RETURN TO KANDAHAR »»

Abdul-Shakour, still unaware that his daughter was dying in the well. The 56th Afghan prisoner to be loaded on to a helicopter was already dead: the Americans had decided to take the body of 85-year-old Haji Birgit Khan with them.

When the helicopters landed at Kandahar airport – headquarters of the 101st Airborne – the villagers were, by their own accounts, herded together into a container. Their legs were tied and then their handcuffs and the manacle of one leg of each prisoner were separately attached to stakes driven into the floor of the container. Thick sacks were put over their heads. Abdul Satar was among the first to be taken from this hot little prison. “Two Americans walked in and tore my clothes off,” he said. “If the clothes would not tear, they cut them off with scissors. They took me out naked to have my beard shaved and to have my photograph taken. Why did they shave off my beard? I had my beard all my life.”

Mohamedin was led naked from his own beard-shaving into an interrogation tent, where his blindfold was removed. “There was an Afghan translator, a Pushtun man with a Kandahar accent in the room, along with American soldiers, both men and women soldiers,” he says. “I was standing there naked in front of them with my hands tied. Some of them were standing, some were sitting at desks. They asked me: ‘What do you do?’ I told them: ‘I am a shepherd – why don’t you ask your soldiers what I was doing?’ They said: ‘Tell us yourself.’ Then they asked: ‘What kind of weapons have you used?’ I told them I hadn’t used any weapon.

“One of them asked: ‘Did you use a weapon during the Russian [occupation] period, the civil war period or the Taliban period?’ I told them that for a lot of the time I was a refugee.” From the villagers’ testimony, it is impossible to identify which American units were engaged in the interrogations. Some US soldiers were wearing berets with yellow or brown badges, others were in civilian clothes but apparently wearing bush hats. The Afghan interpreter was dressed in his traditional salwah khameez. Hakim underwent a slightly longer period of questioning; like Mohamedin, he says he was naked before his interrogators.

“They wanted my age and my job. I said I was 60, that I was a farmer. They asked: ‘Are there any Arabs or Taliban or Iranians or foreigners in your village?’ I said ‘No.’ They asked: ‘How many rooms are there in your house, and do you have a satellite phone?’ I told them: ‘I don’t have a phone. I don’t even have electricity.’ They asked: ‘Were the Taliban good or bad?’ I replied that

« ROBERT FISK / RETURN TO KANDAHAR »»

the Taliban never came to our village so I had no information about them. Then they asked: ‘What about Americans? What kind of people are Americans?’ I replied: ‘We heard that they liberated us with [President Hamid] Karzai and helped us – but we don’t know our crime that we should be treated like this.’ What was I supposed to say?”

A few hours later, the villagers of Hajibirgit were issued with bright-yellow clothes and taken to a series of wire cages laid out over the sand of the airbase – a miniature version of Guantanamo Bay – where they were given bread, biscuits, rice, beans and bottled water. The younger boys were kept in separate cages from the older men. There was no more questioning, but they were held in the cages for another five days. All the while, the Americans were trying to discover the identity of the 85-year-old man. They did not ask their prisoners – who could have identified him at once – although the US interrogators may not have wished them to know that he was dead. In the end, the Americans gave a photograph of the face of the corpse to the International Red Cross. The organisation was immediately told by Kandahar officials that the elderly man was perhaps the most important tribal leader west of the city.

“When we were eventually taken out of the cages, there were five American advisers waiting to talk to us,” Mohamedin says. “They used an interpreter and told us they wanted us to accept their apologies for being mistreated. They said they were sorry. What could we say? We were prisoners. One of the advisers said: ‘We will help you.’ What does that mean?” A fleet of US helicopters flew the 55 men to the Kandahar football stadium – once the scene of Taliban executions – where all were freed, still dressed in prison clothes and each with a plastic ID bracelet round the wrist bearing a number. “Ident-A-Band Bracelet made by Hollister” was written on each one. Only then did the men learn that old Haji Birgit Khan had been killed during the raid a week earlier. And only then did Abdul-Shakour learn that his daughter Zarguna was dead.

The Pentagon initially said that it found it “difficult to believe” that the village women had their hands tied. But given identical descriptions of the treatment of Afghan women after the US bombing of the Uruzgan wedding party, which followed the Hajibirgit raid, it seems that the Americans – or their Afghan allies – did just that. A US military spokesman claimed that American forces had found “items of intelligence value”, weapons and a large amount of cash in the village. What the “items” were was never clarified. The guns were almost certainly for personal protection against robbers. The cash remains a sore point for the villagers. Abdul Satar said that he had 10,000 Pakistani rupees taken

« ROBERT FISK / RETURN TO KANDAHAR »»

from him – about \$200 (£130). Hakim says he lost his savings of 150,000 rupees – \$3,000 (£1,900). “When they freed us, the Americans gave us 2,000 rupees each,” Mohamedin says. “That’s just \$40 [£25]. We’d like the rest of our money.”

But there was a far greater tragedy to confront the men when they reached Hajibirgit. In their absence – without guns to defend the homes, and with the village elder dead and many of the menfolk prisoners of the Americans – thieves had descended on Hajibirgit. A group of men from Helmand province, whose leader is Abdul Rahman Khan – once a brutal and rapacious “mujahid” fighter against the Russians, and now a Karzai government police commander – raided the village once the Americans had taken away so many of the men. Ninety-five of the 105 families had fled into the hills, leaving their mud homes to be pillaged.

The disturbing, frightful questions that creep into the mind of anyone driving across the desert to Hajibirgit today are obvious. Who told the US to raid the village? Who told them that the Taliban leadership and the al-Qa’ida leadership were there? Was it, perhaps, Abdul Rahman Khan, the cruel police chief whose men were so quick to pillage the mud-walled homes once the raid was over? For today, Hajibirgit is a virtual ghost town, its village leader dead, most of its houses abandoned. The US raid was worthless. There are scarcely 40 villagers left. They all gathered at the stone grave of Zarguna some days later, to pay their respects to the memory of the little girl. “We are poor people – what can we do?” Mohamedin asked me. I had no reply. President Bush’s “war on terror”, his struggle of “good against evil” had descended on the innocent village of Hajibirgit.

And now Hajibirgit is dead. >>>

PART TWO

UN offers fresh hell

In Afghanistan, it is possible to go from hell to hell. The first circle of hell is the Waiting Area, the faeces-encrusted dust-bowl in which 60,000 Afghans rot along their frontier with Pakistan at Chaman – a bone-dry, sand-blasted place of patched bedouin tents, skinny camels, infested blankets and skin disease. There are laughing children with terrible facial sores, old women of 30, white-bearded, dark-turbaned men who look, from huts

« ROBERT FISK / RETURN TO KANDAHAR »»

of dry twigs, with suspicion and astonishment at Westerners.

They are a leftover of the last Afghan war, the one we are supposed to believe is over, although they are living proof that hostilities have not ended. At least 40,000 of the Pashtu refugees cannot go home because their people are still persecuted in the north of the country. But Pakistan no longer wants this riff-raff of poor and destitute on its squeaky-clean border.

So the United Nations, that great saviour of the dispossessed, has discovered another vile place for these people. A second circle of hell, 40 miles west of Kandahar, it is a grey, hot desert, reached through minefields, shot through with blow-torch winds and black stones, haunted by great, creased mountains and fine sand hills that move like waves.

The United Nations has drilled wells for the 60,000 – boring more than 20 metres (60ft) for water – yet few UN officials can do more than shake their heads when they stand in this future midden. It is called Zheray Dasht – “yellow desert” in Urdu – because of the flowers that carpet the sand after rain. But it hasn’t rained here for seven years.

Roy Oliff, of the UN High Commission for Refugees, describes the decision-making to us with almost teutonic efficiency as he stands amid this desolation. “There is a political need to move them from Chaman: they may not have a choice,” he says. “This was the only place the Afghan government would let us have. We didn’t get a choice. The local people on the main road didn’t want the displaced persons near their villages in case they took away employment and used their scarce water resources. This area is reasonably [sic] free of mines. We’re not anticipating much resistance. If they get water and food, there’ll be a flood of people here, not resistance. Five thousand people will be housed in 12 settlements.”

Across the hard desert floor, hundreds of empty, dark-brown tents flap in the wind. There are latrines and vast tented reception areas and land for each family on which – if the water holds out in the unending drought – they can plant trees and graze animals. “It takes them a week to build a mud-walled home,” Mr Oliff tells us. Note here the UN-speak.

No choice for the refugees. No choice for the UN. Little resistance from the refugees. That’s how the UN talked in Bosnia as they aided the Serbs in their ethnic cleansing by trucking Muslims from city to city. It isn’t Mr Oliff’s fault. When I gently raise the issue of the UN’s collective conscience, always supposing so sensitive a creature exists within the world’s most bureaucratic institution, he looks at me with some distress. “Everyone involved in this

« ROBERT FISK / RETURN TO KANDAHAR »»

project has misgivings and is making the best of it,” he says.

The truth, which is as scarce as water in Afghanistan, is that Pakistan has already severely limited the ability of humanitarian workers in the border camps and that the Afghan authorities in Kandahar don't want the refugees too close to their own city. There are quite a few Afghan-Arab families in the frontier camps – al-Qa'ida families among them – and several Taliban sympathisers. Spin Boldak, across the old Durrand line from Chaman, was the very last stronghold of the black-turbaned misogynists last December. The Afghans don't want them infecting Kandahar again.

Mohammed Godbedin, of the UNHCR in Chaman, says at least 50 Afghan-Arab families came to the local camps – (“They all came together, not individually,” he says) although many of these families existed long before the days of al-Qa'ida. The remainder of the refugees are Kochi, nomads whose livestock died in the drought, and who never had homes. In a few days, the first of the displaced of Chaman and Spin Boldak will be taken to visit the Yellow Desert, to decide for themselves if they are prepared to move.

But this is a mere ritual. Pakistani and Afghan officials will make the final decision, with the UN's familiar compliance. The refugee leaders will be trucked to the Kandahar-Herat desert highway, then led along a sand trail marked by red and white rocks. On either side of these markers are land-mines left by the mujahedin during the war against the Soviet occupation. “They are vehicle mines, not anti-personnel mines so they won't blow up under people,” one UN official says helpfully.

Unless, of course, the refugees acquire a clapped-out lorry and drive on the wrong side of the markers. Beyond a former Russian military fortress, its tank revetments still evident amid the grey muck, the desert flattens. This is where the land is “reasonably” clear of mines. And where the UN has built its new refugee camp.

Things might be different if the warlord battles ended in the north, if the Americans allowed the international peace-keeping forces to move out of Kabul and collect the weapons in the north and damp down the ethnic fires. More than half the frontier refugees could then go back to their homes. But Afghanistan is becoming more lawless by the week. Refugees remain the linguistic definition of much of this country. And the Yellow Desert, the latest UN prison for the 60,000 destitute of Chaman and Spin Boldak, will soon be on all our maps. >>>

PART THREE

Where are the disappeared?

They came for Hussain Abdul Qadir on 25 May. According to his wife, there were three American agents from the FBI and 25 men from the local Pakistani CID. The Palestinian family had lived in the Pakistani city of Peshawar for years and had even applied for naturalisation. But this was not a friendly visit to their home in Hayatabad Street. “They broke our main gate and came into the house without any

« ROBERT FISK / RETURN TO KANDAHAR »»

respect,” Mrs Abdul Qadir was to report later to the director of human rights at Pakistan’s Ministry of Law and Justice in Islamabad.

“They blindfolded my husband and tied his hands behind his back. They searched everything in the house – they took our computer, mobile phone and even our land-line phone. They took video and audio cassettes. They took all our important documents – our passports and other certificates – and they took our money, too,” she said.

Where, Mrs Abdul Qadir asked Ahsan Akhtar, the director of human rights, was her husband? *The Independent* has now learnt exactly where he is – he is a prisoner in a cage on the huge American air base at Bagram in Afghanistan. He was kidnapped – there appears to be no other word for it – by the Americans and simply flown over the international frontier from Pakistan. His “crime” is unknown. He has no lawyers to defend him. In the vacuum of the US “war on terror”, Mr Abdul Qadir has become a non-person.

His wife has now received a single sheet of paper from the Red Cross which gives no geographical location for the prisoner but lists his nationality as “Palastinian” (sic) and the following message in poorly-written Arabic: “To the family and children in Peshawar. I am well and need, first and foremost, God’s mercy and then your prayers. Take care of your faith and be kind to the little ones. Could you send me my reading glasses? Your father: Hussain Abdul Qadir.”

The sheet of paper is dated 29 June and the Red Cross has confirmed that the prisoner – ICRC number AB7 001486-01 – was interviewed in Bagram.

Needless to say, the Americans will give no information about their prisoners or the reasons for their detention. They will not say whether their interrogators are Afghan or American – there are increasing rumours that Afghan interrogators are allowed to beat prisoners in the presence of CIA men – or if, or when, they intend to release their captives. Indeed, the Americans will not even confirm that prisoners have been seized in Pakistan and taken across the Afghan border.

Fatima Youssef has also complained to the Pakistani authorities that her Syrian husband, Manhal al-Hariri – a school director working for the Saudi Red Crescent Society – was seized on the same night as Mr Abdul Qadir from their home in Peshawar, again by three Americans and a group of Pakistani CID men.

“I have the right to ask where my husband is and to know where they have taken him,” she has written to the Pakistani authorities. “I have the right to ask

« ROBERT FISK / RETURN TO KANDAHAR »

for an appeal to release him now, after an interrogation, I have the right to ask for the return of the things which they took from my house.”

An Algerian doctor, Bositta Fathi, was also taken that same night by two Americans and Pakistani forces, according to his wife. “I don’t have any support and I am not able to go anywhere without my husband,” she has told Mr Akhtar in Islamabad. Both Mr Hariri and Dr Fathi are believed to be held at Bagram, which is now the main American interrogation centre in Afghanistan. “From there,” one humanitarian worker told *The Independent*, “you either get released or packed off to Guantanamo. Who knows what the fate of these people is or what they are supposed to have done? It seems that it’s all outside the law.”

Many Arabs moved to Peshawar during the war against the Russians in Afghanistan and remained there as doctors or aid workers. The Abdul Qadirs, for example, asked for naturalisation in January 1993 – Mr Abdul Qadir holds a Jordanian passport – long before Osama bin Laden returned to Afghanistan and founded his al-Qa’ida movement.

“I don’t know why all this happened to us because we are Muslims and Arabs,” Mrs Abdul Qadir says. “I want to know about my husband. We will leave Pakistan if the government wants us to leave. We will do anything the government wants but in a human and civilised manner.” >>>

PART FOUR

UN's warlord of the year

Gul Afgha knows how to handle the United Nations. He smiles, he praises, he loves the UN, and he is immensely grateful for the advice of Under Secretary General and Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict, the diminutive Ugandan Olara Utunnu. Every time Mr Utunnu talks about democracy and peace and the need for children to receive proper

« ROBERT FISK / RETURN TO KANDAHAR »»

proper schooling, the governor of Kandahar beams with delight. In one corner of his office, the chief of police sits, a massive, high-peaked Soviet-style cap on his head, a tsarist leather strap across his military blouse. In the other, the thin, rather weedy-looking director of education reclines nervously on a sofa, his hands fidgeting constantly with his tie.

Mr Utunnu wants to know about the governor's "vision". And there was just the slightest narrowing of Gul Agha's eyes when this was translated into Pashtu as "puhaa". Warlords don't have a lot of visions but the whiskery Mr Agha, clad in the kind of overtight Marxist brown tunic and trousers that the PLO used to wear, quickly got the idea.

"When I became governor of this city," he told Mr Utunnu, "the doors of education opened." Why, Mr Agha had even spent his own money in opening a special computer school for students, an academy to which he did not invite us but upon which he intended to lavish further personal funds.

"This has not happened anywhere else in the country – not even in Kabul, only in Kandahar." At which point, the fearful director of education took the floor, standing with hands clasped in front of him while delivering a homily on the generosity of the governor of Kandahar, his foresight, his wisdom and, of course, his vision. It was all of six minutes before Mr Utunnu could thank the director so profusely that he was forced to sit down.

No, Mr Agha assured the Special Representative of the Secretary General, there were no underage soldiers or policemen in Kandahar. "We have invested a lot in our police and intelligence forces – we are continuing our efforts to combat terrorism along with the coalition forces."

The problem is that Mr Agha, like almost every other governor in Afghanistan, is a bit of a rogue. Taxes do not all go to central government. His own militia are better paid than government soldiers. But his claim that his schoolteachers were paid twice the average salary of those in Kabul was untrue. They are paid half the salary of Kabul teachers. His references to "our President, the esteemed Mr Karzai" may have satisfied Mr Utunnu (a boy with a treble voice later serenaded the UN's expert on kid soldiers with paeans to both Mr Karzai and Mr Agha), but it's no secret in Kabul that the governor is a loose cannon.

A couple of weeks ago, uneasy at the US air force's propensity for bombing wedding parties, he summoned regional leaders to a meeting at which he wished to demand prior knowledge of American operations in the Kandahar region. Most of his fellow barons – perhaps paid even more by Washington

« ROBERT FISK / RETURN TO KANDAHAR »»

than Mr Agha is – declined to attend. So instead we got a lecture on Mr Agha's love of constitutional law and human rights. And Mr Utunnu then received one of the more imperishable quotations to come from Afghanistan since 11 September: "President Bush of America," the governor announced, "has really appreciated Islamic law ..."

Harsher than the increasingly mellow Druze warrior Walid Jumblatt, infinitely more polite than the Serb mass murderer Ratko Mladic, was the governor of Kandahar trying to win the UN's warlord of the year award? When he offered to show us his prison, there could be no doubt of it. There were, perhaps, a few children in the prison, we were told, but they were merely accompanying their imprisoned mothers. As for child prisoners, think not of it.

So Mr Utunnu and his cortège drove through the fog of diesel smoke and sand to Kandahar's central prison, a rickety barracks with a heavy machine-gun mounted on a tripod over the front gate. "Unspeakable things happened here under the Taliban," one of the governor's minions muttered to me as we entered. I could believe it. In fact, I could believe anything in this prison. The stone floor had been newly scrubbed and the inmates sat in their bright little cells, red and golden carpets on the floor, flowers and pot plants in the window to keep out the sun.

"I've been here for three months," a smiling youth told me. "I stole 20 million Afghanis (£290 – \$360) and I may be here for three years." He had not yet been charged. In fact, virtually no one in the cells appeared to have been charged.

It was all a bit like Potemkin's villages. And, sure enough, when I walked behind the prison guards, I turned a corner to be overcome by a giant, overflowing midden, a common latrine with a single beam of glistening wood for prisoners to sit upon and a floor slippery with shit.

A few dozen metres further, I came to a courtyard in which the prisoners had piled their bedding: rotten, stained mattresses and plastic sheeting and soiled clothes. These, no doubt, were the real furnishings of the tiny brick cells. So who owned the red and golden carpets? "And now the women's prison," trumpeted the police chief in the tsarist uniform. Mr Utunnu strode inside – to find just four sad young girls sitting on the floor of a cell. The first two were wives – or rather widows – of the same husband they had allegedly just killed.

The third had run off with a boy she loved, in preference to the old man to whom her dead father had allegedly betrothed her at birth. The offence of the fourth was unclear. Just what constitutional law the third young woman had transgressed was never vouchsafed but I was assured that her boyfriend would

« ROBERT FISK / RETURN TO KANDAHAR »

be sentenced to five years for “taking her away from home”.

Again, a short walk round the other cells revealed a rather different story. Many of them were packed with hundreds of sacks of US-donated wheat and rice and processed peas. Many others were stacked floor to ceiling with hundreds of Kalashnikov rifles, light and heavy machine-guns, boxes of ammunition and shells.

I asked the Tsarist policeman for an explanation. “This is really a police compound,” he said. “We let these four women stay here because it is more comfortable. What you saw were our stores.” So where, I wondered, was the real women’s prison? Where were the children who were supposedly staying with their mothers? Mr Utunnu was unfazed. An intelligent, sharp, if slightly short-tempered, man, he was an opposition leader in Uganda who — had he not made a judicious exit from his country a few years ago — might have ended up in an institution just like this one. But he declared himself reasonably satisfied. He had talked to the prisoners. They had made no complaints.

He was not in a position, he said, to know if the carpets on the cell floors were usually there. He had wished to visit the prison and his request had been granted.

So, ladies and gentleman, let’s give a big hand to Gul Agha, governor of Kandahar, friend of President Bush, devotee of child education and, most assuredly, winner of the UN’s warlord of the year award. >>>

PART FIVE

US explosives kill innocents

T'amim's family live in Joe Sheer, which means "stream of milk". But, outside his slum home, a stream of warm, reeking sewage flows. Never was there more reason to take off your shoes at a wooden door.

Inside, you climb a narrow staircase and step into an ante-chamber in which Tamim's mother sits on the floor. She wears a purple scarf and the skin around her eyes, after four weeks of crying, has

« ROBERT FISK / RETURN TO KANDAHAR »»

become heavy and blistered. Tamim is dead; which is why I am sitting in this tiny room opposite this quiet, solemn woman.

Her son's killer was a small, round, yellow cylinder buried beneath the ground – a small fragment of an American cluster bomb – which was infinitely more sophisticated and more efficiently made than anything in this ramshackle home. Tamim worked for the Halo Trust, the mine-clearing operation to which Diana, Princess of Wales, gave so much publicity, and he was an experienced man, 25 years old, with four years of de-mining to his name.

“I know what I'm doing,” he used to tell his mother. “It was partly because of our poverty that he did the work,” she says. “I took him to the Halo office for this job. He got \$130 (£98) a month. On the morning of his death, he had been taking a rest in the minefield. He had some yoghurt and sat in a corner and all of a sudden it exploded.”

This kind of story-telling has a certain ritual, the circular memory that recasts, again and again, the moment of terrible truth. “His uncle came home that day – it was a month ago – and he was crying. He said he had a headache. Then he said that Tamim had injured himself. The moment he said ‘injured’, I knew that it was over. But thank God at least my son died a dignified death, trying to save other people's lives. He didn't die robbing or torturing or killing.”

The family think they will receive about £12,000 in compensation, not much in comparison to the £53,000 that a dead American mine-clearer's family might expect. But these are Afghan prices for Afghans dying in Afghanistan while trying to destroy America's weapons.

The mines, of course, come from a host of countries, some from the old “evil empire”, others from the current “axis of evil” and, needless to say, many from the “civilised” countries which are fighting the war of “good against evil”: the old Soviet Union, Iran, Korea, the new Russia, Belgium, Italy, the United States and Britain.

But Tamim – like so many other Afghans – was killed by an American cluster bomb, 20 per cent of whose “bomblets” bury themselves in the ground, turning themselves in a millisecond into a mine. When the Americans dropped this ordnance on the Taliban, they must have known this; they must have known that each of their missions in their “war on terror” would later cost the lives of countless innocent Afghans.

Sitting on the table of Abdul Latif Matin, the cluster bomblet looks more like a toy than a killer. It is round and yellow with a canvas fan on the top. “BOMB. FRAG BLU 97A/B 809420-30 LOT ATB92G109-001,” is printed on the side.

« ROBERT FISK / RETURN TO KANDAHAR »»

BLU stands for Bomb Live Unit and 202 of these little murderers are inside each 430kg CBU – Combined Effects Munition – dropped by American planes.

Mr Matin is a regional manager for the UN Mine Clearing and Planning Agency in Kabul which has 15 mine-action organisations – including Halo – co-ordinating 4,700 staff across Afghanistan.

Statistics, for Mr Matin, bear no emotions. His office covers seven provinces around Kabul in which 1.1 million unexploded bombs and mines have already been cleared. In these de-mining operations, about 100 Afghans have died. More than 500 have been injured, many of whom return to the minefields to work once their wounds are healed.

The thousands of other Afghan mine victims are a kind of limbless army. They queue at the Mirweis hospital in Kandahar for artificial legs. They watch another small army of prosthesis specialists carving and shaping the legs and arms of future victims. They stand in the darkened ruins of this grim, hot city. But it is the cluster bomb – the newest and deadliest of Afghanistan’s hidden mines – that absorbs the work of Abdul Latif.

“The coalition forces claimed that only 5 per cent fail to explode but we think the figure is nearer to 15 per cent,” he says. “Just a few days ago, three children were wounded. One of them threw this bomblet at another. She thought it was a toy. The trouble with the BLUs is that they go underground – they caused our two most recent fatalities among de-miners.

“I’ve seen very, very bad tragedies. I have taken the dead bodies of my own colleagues to their families. I’ve had to look at their wives and children. It’s totally unfair and that’s why the Afghans themselves have started a campaign to ban landmines.”

If Mr Latif is a bureaucrat, he also has a strong heart. “We Muslims think that de-mining is part of our Holy War – it’s a ‘jihad’ against the invisible enemies of Afghanistan. Yes, of course, we believe if we die de-mining, we will go to paradise.”

Which is hopefully where Tamim now resides. His solemn mother produces two photographs of him. In the first, he stands in his de-mining clothes, at home, in front of a net curtain, bearded and – you only have to look into his eyes – frightened. In the other photograph, he stands on a mountainside in dark clothes, every inch an Afghan waiting for martyrdom.

Mr Latif acknowledges that mine producers have helped his organisation with funds and equipment. But it is the Afghans themselves who have to do the dirty work. “The strongest support we need is for these people to stop

« **ROBERT FISK** / RETURN TO KANDAHAR »»

producing the mines and cluster bombs,” he says.

Just for the record, two American companies made the vicious little munitions that killed Tamim and his colleague. One is Olin Ordnance of Downey, California. The other is Alliant Tech Systems Inc of Hopkins, Minnesota. They were awarded a contract in 1992 for 9,598 cluster bombs – a total of almost two million BLUs – to replace the same type of weapons that were used up in the Gulf War the year before. Cluster bombs not only kill, it seems. They are also profitable. >>>

PART SIX

The grim and bloody backlash

The US special forces boys barged into the Kandahar guest house as if they belonged to an army of occupation. One of them wore kitty-litter camouflage fatigues and bush hat, another was in civilian clothes, paunchy with jeans. The interior of their four-wheel drives glittered with guns. They wanted to know if a man called Hazrat was staying at the guest house. They didn't say why. They didn't say

« ROBERT FISK / RETURN TO KANDAHAR »»

who Hazrat was. The concierge had never heard the name. The five men left, unsmiling, driving at speed back on to the main road. “Why did they talk to me like that?” the concierge asked me. “Who do they think they are?” It was best not to reply.

“The Afghan people will wait a little longer for all the help they have been promised,” the local district officer in Maiwind muttered to me a few hours later. “We believe the Americans want to help us. They promised us help. They have a little longer to prove they mean this. After that ...” He didn’t need to say more. Out at Maiwind, in the oven-like grey desert west of Kandahar, the Americans do raids, not aid.

Even when the US military tries to bend its hand to a little humanitarian work, the Western NGOs (non-governmental organisations working with the UN) prefer to keep their distance. As a British NGO worker put it with devastating frankness in Kandahar: “When there is a backlash against the Americans, we want a clear definition between us and them.” You hear that phrase all the time in Afghanistan. “When the backlash comes...”

It is already coming. The Americans are being attacked almost every night. There have been three shootings in Kandahar, with an American officer wounded in the neck near the airport two weeks ago. American troops can no longer dine out in Kandahar’s cafés. Today, US forces are under attack in Khost province. Two Afghan auxiliaries were killed and five American soldiers wounded near the Pakistan border at the end of July.

For the NGOs in Kabul, the danger lies in the grey area, a deliberate grey area, they say, which the Americans have created between military operations and humanitarian aid. “Up in Kunduz, they’ve got what they call a ‘humanitarian liaison team’ that has repaired a ward in a local hospital and been involved in rebuilding destroyed bridges,” the Briton said. “Some of the men with them have been in civilian clothes but carrying guns. We took this up with them, because Afghans began to think that our aid organisation also carried guns. The US told us their men didn’t carry weapons openly or wear full uniforms out of deference to the feelings of local tribal leaders. Eventually, we all had to raise this matter in Washington.”

It’s not difficult to see the dangers. In Kabul, for example, the Americans operate an outfit called the CJCMOTF, the Coalition Joint Civil-Military Operations Task Force, whose mission, an official US document says, includes “expertise in supply, transportation, medical [sic], legal, engineering and civil affairs”. Headquartered in Kabul, it has “daily contact with [the] US embassy”.

« ROBERT FISK / RETURN TO KANDAHAR »»

Their personnel definitions include “physician, veterinarian, attorney, civil engineer, teacher, firefighter, construction, management” but their military experience is listed as “Desert Storm, Operation Provide Comfort, Panama, Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo”. Then there’s the CHLC, the “Coalition Humanitarian Liaison Centre”, at Mazar-i-Sharif whose objective has been “liaison between assistance [sic] community and military coalition” and which has included “rebuilding public facilities, 14 schools, providing a generator for the airport terminal and providing a medical clinic, a veterinarian clinic and a library”.

But its tasks also include “security information”, a “channel of communication to coalition commanders, US embassy and USAID” and, an interesting one, this, “miscellaneous supplies, eg concertina wire”. Somehow, rebuilding schools has got mixed up with the provision of barbed wire.

It makes the aid agencies shudder. “I have banned all coalition forces from my compound and will not meet with them in public,” a Western humanitarian official told me in Kabul. “If they want to contact me, I tell them to send me e-mails. I will meet them only in certain public authority offices. Yes, of course we are worried that people will mistake us for the military. They have these ‘humanitarian units’ and they ask ‘how can we coordinate with you?’ but I refuse to co-ordinate with them. They simply have no idea how to deal with the social, cultural, political complex of life here. They are really not interested. They just want to fight a ‘war on terror’. I don’t think they care.”

This was no minor official but a Western co-ordinator handling millions of dollars of international aid. He knows, as do his staff, how angry Afghans are becoming at the growing US presence in their country. As long as Washington goes on paying the private salaries of local warlords, including some who oppose President Hamid Karzai, a kind of truce will continue to exist, but Afghans take a shrewd interest in America’s activities here and their anger has been stoked by US bombing raids that left hundreds of innocent Afghans dead.

After the Americans bombed a wedding party in Uruzgan on 30 June – the death toll reliably stands at 55 after several more wounded died – Pashtuns were outraged at eyewitness accounts of US troops preventing survivors helping the wounded. They were especially infuriated by a report that the Americans had taken photographs of the naked bodies of dead Afghan women.

An explanation is not difficult to find. For their own investigation, US forces may well have taken pictures of the dead after the Uruzgan raid and, since bombs generally blast the clothes off their victims, dead female Afghans would

« **ROBERT FISK / RETURN TO KANDAHAR** »

be naked. But the story has become legend. Americans take pictures of naked Afghan women. It's easy to see how this can turn potential Afghan friends into enemies.

Now guerrilla attacks are increasingly targeting Afghan forces loyal to the government or loyal to local drug-dealers who are friendly with the Americans. Just as the first mujahedin assaults on the Russians after the 1980 Soviet invasion tended to focus on Moscow's local Afghan communist allies, so the new attacks are being directed at America's Afghan allies.

Even in the Panjshir valley, in Molla, the closest village to the tomb of Ahmed Shah Masood, the Northern Alliance commander murdered by two Arab suicide bombers posing as journalists just two days before 11 September, the local Muslim cleric has been preaching against the Americans.

One Friday last month, Imam Mohamed Sayed told his worshippers he had a dream and he had seen the dead Masood wearing a sad face. "He was not happy," Imam Sayed told his largely pro-American congregation. "He said the Americans are like the Russians and that we must wage 'holy war' against them."

Mercifully for the Americans – for this is largely friendly, Tajik territory for the United States – Imam Sayed's audience was largely unmoved. For the moment, at least. >>>

ROBERT FISK

is the Middle East correspondent
of *The Independent* of London.

Based in Beirut, he has won
many journalism awards for his
reporting of the Iranian
revolution and wars in Lebanon,
the Gulf, Kosovo and Algeria.

Designed by Tony Sutton

ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD

www.coldtype.net