

Opinion

Scarred forts and sandbagged pubs

By DON DUNCAN OCT. 17, 2008

A visit there today makes it clear that there are two Afghanistans. There's the Afghanistan at war, to the south, particularly in the provinces of Helmand and Kandahar. But there's an Afghanistan at peace, with varying levels of stability from jittery, paranoid Kabul to the carefree Mazar-i-Sharif in the north - Afghanistan's fourth largest city - where I spent most of my time during a reporting trip in May.

I stayed at the Barat Hotel, one of just two in the city. I had an entire floor to myself, as did each of the six other guests. The tourists had come to see what Afghanistan was like behind the headlines. One woman from Switzerland had come to understand the plight of the disabled; she was in a wheelchair and wanted to see how a country with 10 percent of its population disabled by war and disease is dealing with the problem. (Not very well.)

The Barat Hotel stands opposite the Blue Mosque, a complex of pools, green areas and zones of prayer which every evening becomes a bustling confluence of life. The sunsets are sublime; the dying rays catch thousands of white doves, the splash of children playing in the fountains, the flowing movement of burqas and wisps of smoke from men gathered to chat.

In Mazar and its surrounding region, I wanted to see how Afghanistan at peace had been changed through development. I also wanted to get a closer look at things that hadn't changed, relics of oppression both physical and psychic that have yet to become a thing of the past.

Qala-i-Jangi (House of War), a 19th-century fortress 20 kilometers outside Mazar, is a testament to the victory of Western forces in the north. The Taliban

resisted there during the initial offensive by the Northern Alliance, backed by the U.S.-led coalition forces. Some 300 Taliban fighters held by the Northern Alliance in the fortress rose up and fought for seven days before being subdued by heavy artillery fire.

The bullet holes along the walls of the fortress remain unplastered. Rusty remnants of tanks and heavy artillery lie strewn around. Graffiti scratched into black scorched walls in Persian and in Urdu say "Long Live the Taliban" or "In Memory of Mullah Mohammad Jan Akhond," a Pakistani fighter with the Taliban who died in the conflict.

My tour guide, Shoib, knows this because he was there, as a translator for the U.S. Army. In the stable parts of Afghanistan, people like Shoib, who have worked as translators for the army and press since 2001, are playing guide to the tiny trickle of tourists.

Mazar-i-Sharif, and the surrounding region, is one of the most stable places in Afghanistan, which allows visitors to forget that much of the rest of the country is at war. Troops are nowhere to be seen in Mazar, and so it is easy to forget that this security is artificial, propped up by the presence of 71,000 foreign troops and dependent on the continued will of the United States and NATO to keep them there.

Walking around on one's own is not a problem. There are stores to buy crafted wood, woollen hats, Uzbek embroideries or handmade carpets, some of which depict key moments in Afghanistan's recent history - the end of the Soviet occupation in 1989, the World Trade Center attacks on 9/11, the arrival of the U.S.-led coalition forces later the same year.

The changes that have come to Mazar since 2001 are so great that some returning refugees struggle to find their bearings and the streets and houses where they once lived. Modern glass and concrete buildings have sprung up next to traditional adobe houses. Many roads have been paved, with elaborate roundabouts built in public-private partnership.

Signs of Western influence abound - new schools, wells and roads all have plaques attesting to the sponsorship of France, Japan or Sweden. Billboards along the new roads show smiling young professionals chatting on new mobile phones.

There are stories behind the smallest of things, legacies of the Taliban era. Windows on the fronts of most houses are narrow horizontal strips high up on the wall. Shoib says this was not always so. Afghans used to have windows that let in light from the street. But the Taliban deemed visibility of the domestic realm from the outside indecent, and ordered front windows to be bricked up.

The cracks along the walls of the Sultan Razia High School for Girls hark back to its previous function as a Taliban base. It was bombed by the U.S. Air Force in its assault on the Taliban strongholds of Mazar in 2001. Fresh plaster next to the cracks is testimony to the reconstruction of the building and its return to its intended purpose as a powerhouse of female literacy in Mazar. The school educates 5,000 young women, all denied education under the Taliban.

Every positive sign here has a negative parallel elsewhere in the less stable regions. The Taliban have made other girls' schools bombing targets in an effort to undo what they see as Western influence in Afghanistan. But here, in mid-afternoon, a woman rings a shrill bell and a sea of girls pours down the stairs, dressed in black tunics and white head scarves, flooding the courtyard outside where they don their pleated burqas as they advance toward the main gate.

Artillery and manpower are the key weapons against the Taliban to the war-torn south. In the rest of the country, the key weapon is concrete. Building roads through the once hard-to-control regions is a means of consolidating the hard-won stability. International development groups have spent over \$2 billion on roads since 2001. The infrastructure improvements increase development in hard-to-reach areas and deprive the guerrilla side of asymmetrical warfare of its key asset: a territorial upper hand.

Among the people, things change a little more slowly. Psychological legacies of the Taliban era are all around. There is a fear of retribution, a reluctance to criticize authority - acts of such defiance would have landed you in jail or worse a decade ago.

People are afraid to speak about some issues, Shoib said, such as the government, the poppy harvest which has been eradicated and the hashish cultivation that has replaced it.

Mazar's feeling of security and stability begins to fall away as you get to Kabul, 45 minutes to the south by plane (or six hours by car). NATO and Afghan

military personnel abound, there are checkpoints and sandbagged entrances, and Afghan hosts tend to chaperone Western visitors.

Since a suicide bomb attack in January on the posh Serena Hotel, Western-style establishments have increased security precautions. Popping down, say, to the Hare and Hounds pub in Sherpur Square for a beer means an armed driver from the hotel and walking through a wall of sandbags to a metal door. You knock, show your passport, get frisked, pass through another door, and another; each is locked behind you before the next one opens. Finally the last door opens to the interior of an English pub.

There is a greater mix of Afghan and foreign cultures in Kabul, an awkward cosmopolitanism. You find many young Kabulis at dusk up on Swimming Pool Hill, in T-shirts and jeans, with long hair blowing in the wind, riding on skateboards on the smooth floor of the swimming pool that the Soviets built there for soldiers stationed on the peak overlooking Kabul. The Taliban left it empty but used its high diving board to push criminals and homosexuals off onto the concrete below. If they survived, they were judged innocent. Few did.

The view from its peak is breathtaking: a panorama of Kabul and in the foreground, boys whizzing by on skate boards, dressed for California.

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