

Life through the eyes of a 21 year old Afghan

By NAOMI MINWALLA

Before the invasion of our country by the Soviets, we lived a peaceful life. Our country was developing. Now, our country is a battlefield. People are scared. Destruction and bombing are present everywhere. I hear crying. I see the graves of martyred people.

— Afghan refugee
Hashmatullah Popal

In April 1978, Muhammed Daoud Khan, the last Durrani ruler of Afghanistan, was deposed by a small group of Marxists who were part of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). Having experienced leadership changes before,

refugees into neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. The latter now contains the largest refugee population in the world.

Last summer, I worked for a voluntary relief organization called the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Peshawar, Pakistan. Having direct contact with the Afghan people provided me with valuable insights about the incredible experiences Afghans have lived.

The impact of their struggles can be seen more explicitly by looking through the eyes of a 21-year-old Afghan refugee I met named Hashmatullah Popal.

Hashmatullah did not choose to leave his home in Afghanistan. After

He was forced to establish himself in a place where he did not really want to be.

Nevertheless, he enrolled in the IRC-sponsored English Language Program and eventually learned the language well enough to teach beginning students.

But this is not enough for him. He seeks higher education so that he may one day help in the reconstruction of his country. At an age where most of us are given opportunities to pursue interests and expand our knowledge in preparation for adult lives, Hashmatullah feels stagnant.

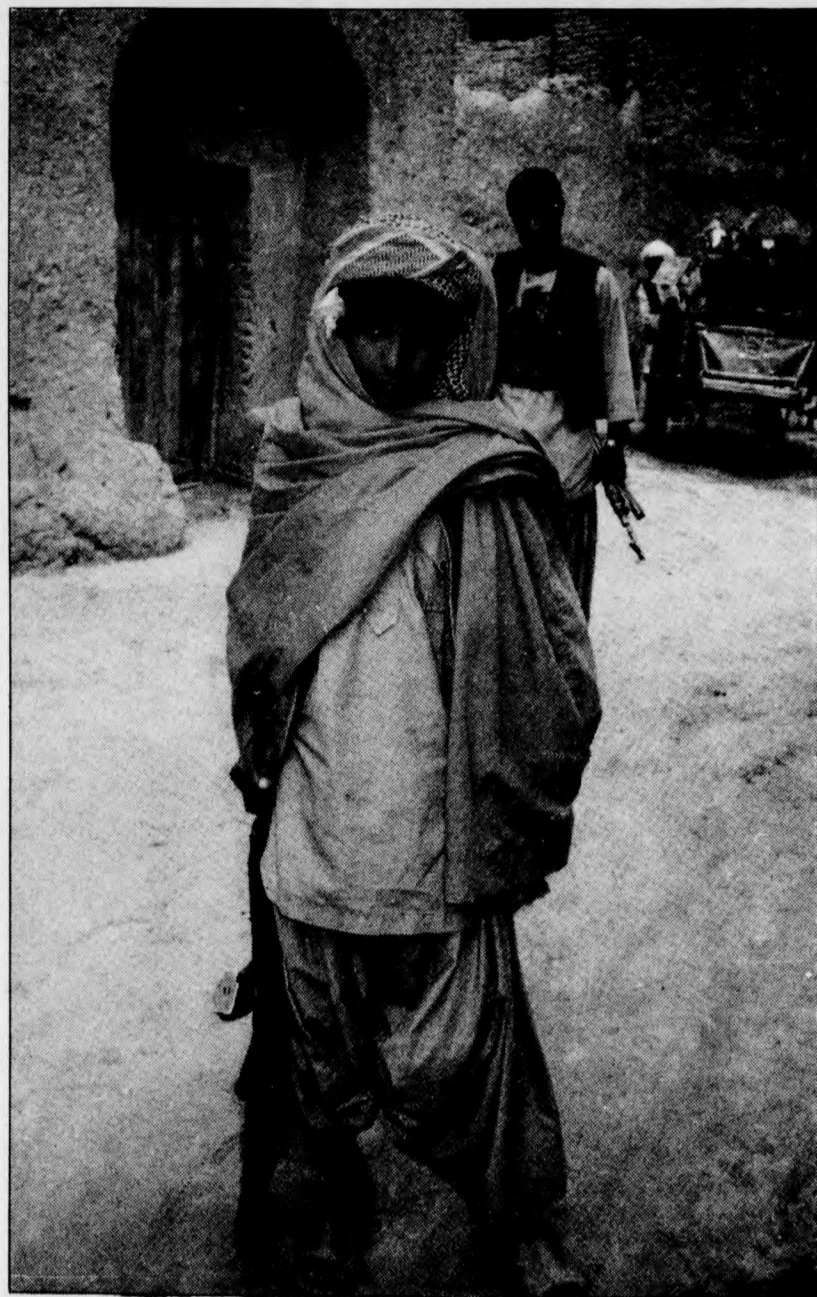
Hashmatullah also had to deal with the cultural differences between Afghans and Pakistanis. The late President Zia-ul-Haq was responsible for the greater Islamization of Pakistani society. This has resulted in an extreme form of conservatism which has placed restrictions on everyone — especially women. Women in Pakistan have been prohibited from education, employment, and public exposure. As Hashmatullah explains, "I can't even walk down the street with my own mother."

Regardless of the hardships, the Afghan people are characterized by an enormous amount of pride, courage, and determination. The Mujahideen (Afghan rebels) have proven their resilience, and a United Nations resolution to the Afghan situation was signed last spring. Fifty percent of the Soviet forces withdrew by August 1988, and all troops should be out of Afghanistan early next year.

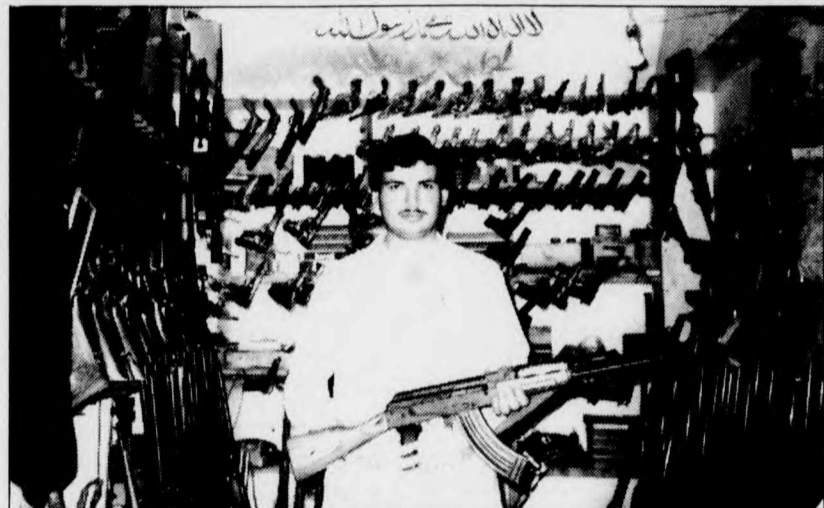
Nevertheless, the Afghans will still be faced with immense difficulties. The people have lost almost all of their possessions — villages, homes, family, and friends. Land is destroyed or full of chemicals from warfare. Landmines are everywhere. When the Afghans return home it will almost be as if they are again refugees in their own country.

Moreover, a "brain drain" (most of the educated Afghans are emigrating to the West) will leave a mass of illiterate people faced with the task of rebuilding their country. There is no guarantee that all of the intellectuals will return.

More than ever, the people of Afghanistan



It is not uncommon to see young boys prepared to fight alongside the Afghan Mujahideen.



A GUNSHOP IN DARA, PAKISTAN: This man is holding a handmade replica of a Russia Kalishnikov

the Afghans were patient and did not question the new government.

It was soon realized, however, that the leaders of the "Saur" Revolution planned major economic, social, and political transformations which alienated the majority of Afghan people. Included were reforms of the traditional bride price, legal age of marriage, women's education, and land distribution. These measures eventually provoked protest.

Unable to control the resistance, the communist government turned to coercion, which resulted in mass rebellion. In December 1979, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and declared Babrak Karmal the new leader. This event sent a flood of

finishing high school in 1985, he left his country because the government was forcing all graduates to join the Soviet-supported army. He and his family fled Afghanistan and walked four days straight over very rough terrain until they reached Pakistan.

Although welcomed by his "Muslim brothers" in Pakistan, Hashmatullah was still faced with many difficulties. Pakistan has its own economic problems and it is difficult for anyone — especially the roughly three million Afghans — to find a job. Hashmatullah and his family left all their possessions in Afghanistan and were penniless. Being a recent graduate, Hashmatullah also had no work experience.

tan are in desperate need of help from other nations.

"If you leave a country which you lived in all of your life, it is very sad," Hashmatullah laments. "As an Afghan youth, I call upon all peace-loving nations to understand the Afghan cause and help us with the liberation of our country. Our hope and love will lead us through our difficulties toward peace."

Naomi Minwalla is a second-year York undergraduate studying Economics and Political Science at York University. She has just returned from a summer posting with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Peshawar, Pakistan. The IRC is a non-sectarian, voluntary organization which provides relief to refugees world-wide. Minwalla's work involved designing a curriculum and teaching a course in the Women's Higher Educational Programme for Afghan refugee women.

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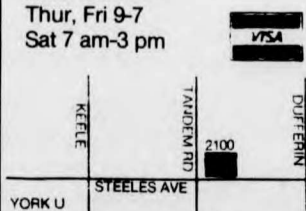
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