

Afghanistan Reborn

Largest refugee return in modern world history shows confidence and hope

Kabul, Afghanistan

You can witness the rebirth of Afghanistan after 23 years of savage warfare by going to the United Nations Refugee Center here. Painted trucks laden with refugees return each day from Pakistan and Iran bearing hundreds of Afghans to their homeland. Month by month they flow back home.

Already 3.7 million Afghans have returned from refugee camps since the Taliban's repressive rule ended in November 2001. It is an epic pilgrimage of an entire people, from wizened old men and women to small children born far from their homeland. They are carrying the poles of their refugee shacks, their goats, their woven clothes and pots and pans, returning to their villages and farms to begin life anew.

They are voting with their feet by rejoining a country that defeated communist troops from the Soviet Union but then fell prey to fanatic religious Taliban zealots aligned with terrorist Osama bin Laden. At a U.N. compound, the refugees get \$13 per person, vaccinations, a lesson on the dangers of land mines, and transport back to their towns and villages. They also get food for six months and other help to restart their lives.

Since U.S. troops helped the Afghans get rid of the Taliban in November 2001, the refugees have had but one thought—it's time to go back home.

"I earned more money each day in Pakistan," said one young man as he filled a water jug on a hillside neighborhood of Kabul. "But this is our home."

In Mazar-i Sharif, the principal of Nau Behar School said that his enrollment has in-

creased from 400 students to 2,500 since the Taliban were defeated, allowing girls and refugees to return to class. Children wait outside the school for one of the three shifts to begin, crowd the newly painted hallways or sit at new desks in tents erected in the courtyard.

Another sign of the new life in this ancient land, which ruled much of India in the 1500s under the Moghul Emperor Babur, can be seen along the highway leading into Kabul from the northern Shomali plains. Truck after truck rolls by laden with building stone, bricks, and gravel. A construction boom has seized Afghanistan. Homes, mosques, hotels: Everywhere people are making bricks and cement blocks. Steel reinforcing bars poke crooked fingers into the sky from a hundred cement footings rising amidst the ruins of Southwestern Kabul along Darulaman Avenue.

Once, this area was the front line between rival mujahidin fighters seeking to control the power vacuum left when the Russians had had enough and went home in 1989. The factional fighting ended when the

In 2004, some 500,000 had returned by August. In July alone, 120,000 people came home—without fanfare or press coverage, joining the biggest voluntary repatriation of refugees in modern world history.

ultra-religious Taliban formed an army in the refugee camps and seized power in 1996. The Taliban barred women from work and schools, outlawed television and music, forced people to pray, destroyed 2,000 year old giant stone Buddhas at Bamiyan, and invited Osama bin Laden to operate Al Qaeda's terrorist training camps.

The September 11 attacks led the United States to overthrow the Taliban, routing Al Qaeda and sparking the rebirth of the country amid the ruins of the fighting.

Today, workers put the finishing touches to a brand new dormitory for 1,100 girls at Kabul University, built by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). At a clinic in Charikar north of Kabul,



Afghan workmen make bricks at a Kabul building project rising amid the rubble left by war.

Syed Iam Sabarwony/USAID



September '01

Northern Alliance commander Ahmad Shah Masood killed

World Trade Center, Pentagon attacked on 9-11

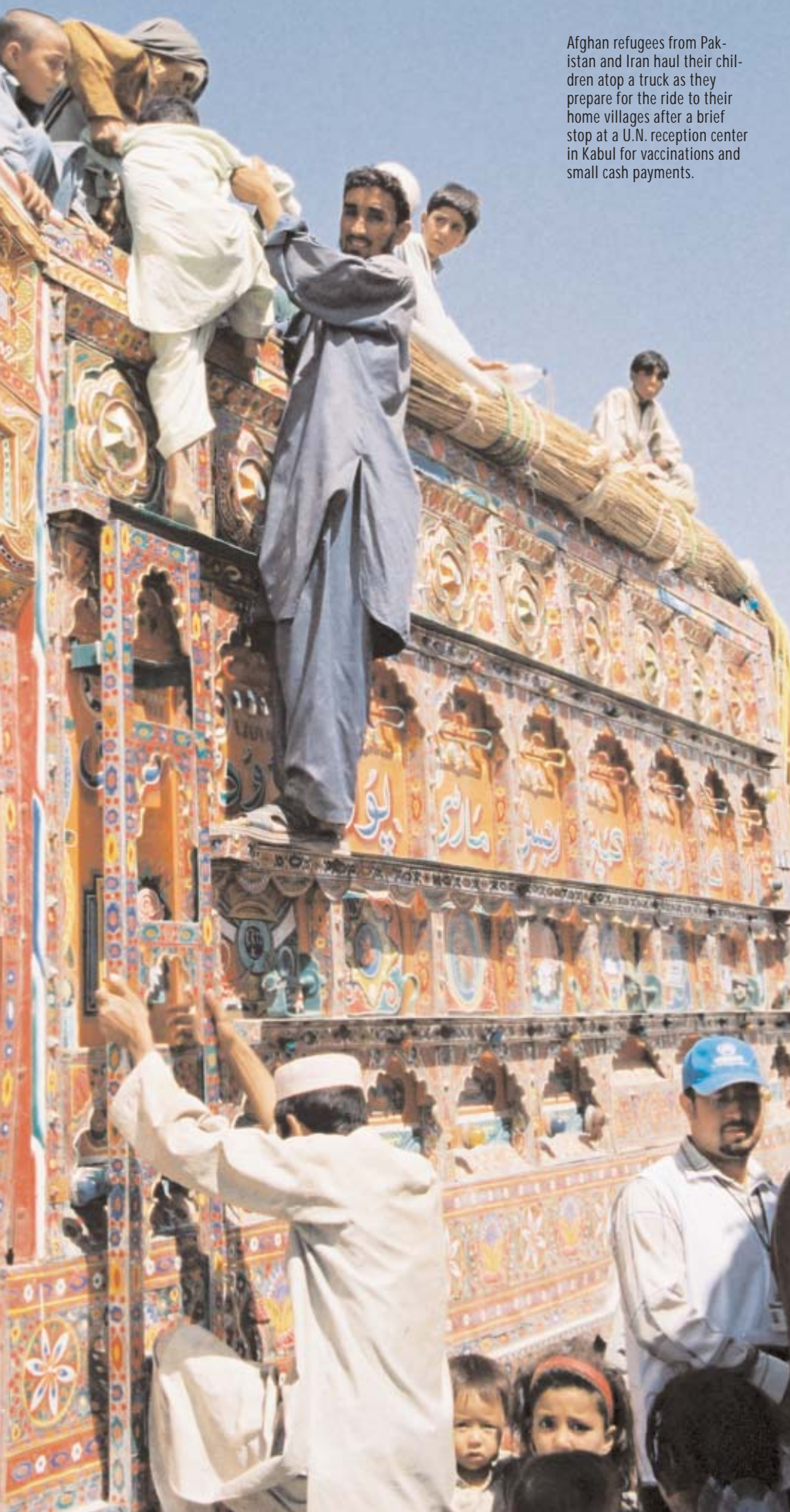
October '01

US, British forces strike Taliban, al Qaeda

President Bush announces \$320 million Afghan aid package

USAID begins massive emergency food program with WFP

Afghan refugees from Pakistan and Iran haul their children atop a truck as they prepare for the ride to their home villages after a brief stop at a U.N. reception center in Kabul for vaccinations and small cash payments.



"I earned more money each day in Pakistan, but this is our home."

Ibrahim Shah, 18, a workman at a new Afghan National Army base going up on the outskirts of Kabul

Nafasgul, 32, brings her son Firdaus for an examination and vaccination.

"Under the Taliban, I could not leave the house when my children were sick, even to go to a clinic or to buy medicine," she recalled, speaking through an interpreter.

With \$8 billion pledged in aid for the coming years by the United States and other donors at the Berlin conference in March this year, Afghans are making huge leaps forward. Hundreds of new newspapers and radio stations operate freely, a new currency and sound financial policies encourage investment in construction, and farmers have vastly increased grain and other production as canals have been repaired. New roads link cities and towns, and the first presidential elections in Afghan history are set for Oct. 9, 2004. Even security is improving, despite the occasional attack by die-hard Taliban backers, as 14,000 Afghan National Army troops trained by coalition allies take to the field.

The struggle to restore Afghanistan after decades of conflict is not over. Iran seeks influence in the country, and Taliban and Al Qaeda forces find refuge along the border with Pakistan. Tension between India and Pakistan could also affect Afghanistan, which shares borders with both.

Some 29 countries have sent troops to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) patrolling the Kabul region, and the United States has about 20,000 troops keeping any Taliban or Al Qaeda holdouts at bay. Most Afghans say they want these forces to remain—although they stress that the foreigners must respect Islam.

"If the Americans cooperate and work with us in our cultural norms, we would love them to stay forever because of the results we are getting," said Jamshed Nassim, 22, a construction worker building an Afghan National Army base in southwestern Kabul.

Afghanistan has to repair the damage left by the Soviets, the Taliban, and the fighting among the political, regional and ethnic factions. Now a more modern society is being built: a market economy is emerging, and women's rights, the rule of law, education, and agricultural improvements are taking hold. International aid is helping. A balance is emerging in which the future is being written before our very eyes.

November '01

Mazar-i Sharif and Kabul liberated by Coalition forces

Japan offers logistics support for anti-terror campaign

December '01

Bonn Accords signed

Taliban flee Kandahar

Afghan Interim Authority created

Interim govt. headed by Hamid Karzai sworn in

UN Security Council approves ISAF

UN Security Council approves ISAF