

Inside Jalalabad: A Sad, Crumbling Shell

By JOHN F. BURNSSpecial to The New York Times

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JALALABAD, Afghanistan, May 10 — After nearly 10 weeks of the most intensive bombardment in Afghanistan's decade-old war, this city has been reduced to a sad, crumbling shell of the place favored for centuries by Afghanistans' poets and kings.

The first Westerners to see what has become of Jalalabad since it came under siege by Muslim guerrillas arrived today to a city alive with blossoms of mimosa, jasmine and bougainvillea. But little else that the visitors saw in a four and a half hour visit here resembled the Jalalabad of prewar years, a city celebrated for its palaces, orchards and gardens.

Large sections have been bombarded and abandoned, while others, especially the mud-walled sections of the old town, have been shattered by the unrelenting rocket and artillery attacks of rebels who have received much of their weaponry from the United States.

After a hazardous helicopter journey across guerrilla-held ter-

rain from Kabul, the capital, 80 miles to the west, a small group of reporters was moved about the city by bus, bouncing along streets that have been reduced in places to little more than obstacle courses around pits dug by rockets and tanks.

Although the damage to buildings appeared to be less severe than described by Soviet officials in Kabul, who told Westerners that Jalalabad had become the Stalingrad of the Afghan war, it seemed obvious that when peace comes, large sections of the city will need to be rebuilt.

At one of the most heavily contested centers, the airport, which lies along an avenue of plane trees about five miles east of the city center, little recognizable remained.

Pockmarked Buildings

Guerrillas who approached to within a few hundred yards of the runway in the first days of fighting have destroyed the only hangar. Their attacks left the control tower a shell, with nothing where controllers and radar equipment used to be but an array of battered tables

used by lookouts, protected now by camouflage netting instead of window glass. Rocket holes in the runway appeared to have been repaired, but officials acknowledged that it has been weeks since any aircraft used the airport.

In the old city, a jumble of mud-walled homes that can be seen for miles in each direction, some streets have hardly any homes that have not been hit by rockets or shells. Visitors walking down one dusty pathway were beckoned repeatedly into doorways to inspect the destruction.

Along Torkham Street, said by officials to be the main avenue of the city's newer district, and in an adjacent residential district called Roshanmena, sprawling homes with orchards for gardens were pockmarked with shrapnel, and many appeared to have been abandoned. The city's main high school, its university, its courthouse, its prison, at least two hospitals, and several major Government buildings appeared to have been so badly damaged as to be unusable.

Along the tour, the visitors en-

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The New York Times/John F. Burns
An Afghan soldier guarding a Soviet-made MI-8 helicopter shot down by guerrillas on the outskirts of Jalalabad. For the Government, helicopters have been Jalalabad's only link with Kabul.

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countered a mixture of bravado from the city's commanding generals and anger at the guerrillas and at the United States from grieving residents who, by chance or arrangement, greeted the reporters at a hospital, a Sikh temple and a mosque that was said to have been hit by rockets, as well as on other stops laid on by the Government.

According to officials, the anger has been generated by the deaths of more than 500 civilians in the bombardments since the fighting began March 6, and by wounds to another 2,500 to 3,000 non-combatants, with more than 60 percent of all casualties said by the officials to have occurred among women and children.

General's Vow: No Surrender

Since the assault on Jalalabad began, barely three weeks after the last Soviet troops withdrew from the war on Feb. 15, no officer has been more widely celebrated in Government pronouncements than Lieut. Gen. Manoki Mangal, the 40-year-old infantry officer who doubles as governor of Nangahar Province, which includes Jalalabad, and as chairman of the province's Defense Council. He has been showered with honors by President Najibullah, leader of the Kabul regime, and has responded with vows never to capitulate to the guerrilla forces dug into the low brown hills that surround Jalalabad on three sides.

Today, speaking to the reporters in the auditorium of Jalalabad's largest hospital, he lived up to his billing. "You see that Jalalabad is alive," he said, the red color tabs on his battle fatigues glinting in the glare of television lights. He described the "shameful defeat" that he said his forces had inflicted on the guerrillas, and said 131,000 guerrilla rockets, shells and mortars that had fallen on Jalalabad had done nothing but strengthen the defenders' resolve. "Even if they were to take 10 years, they couldn't capture this city," he said.

The general's harshest words were reserved for the United States and Pakistan, who have been accused here of organizing and directing the guerrilla attack on Jalalabad. He cited a report in The New York Times last month that said that the decision to launch the attack had been made at a meeting in Islamabad, Pakistan's capital, that was attended by Pakistan's top military and civilian leaders and by Robert B. Oakley, the United States Ambassador, with no Afghan guerrilla representatives present. And he declared, "I can tell you with confidence that all the hostile plans of the Pakistanis and of the Pentagon will be demolished."

U.S. Reporters Assailed

Elsewhere on the visit, the reporters confronted a barrage of hostility toward the United States. But because of officials' insistence that the group adhere to a schedule, it was difficult to determine whether the outbursts were typical of opinion among the city's population, said by General Mangal to be 170,000. At each stop, at least one person came forward in apparent fury to assail reporters who had been identified to them as coming from the United States. On one occasion, at the hospital, a woman had to be restrained from hitting an official acting as an interpreter, whom she apparently judged to be insufficiently concerned.

Trip to the City: No More Delays

"We are not infidels, we are Muslim, so why do you send your rockets to kill us?" the woman, identified as Kaouki, shouted. Moments earlier, she had been encountered standing at the bedside of her 15-year-old son, Faizal, recovering from surgery after a rocket struck the family's home over the weekend, killing two other children in the family.

For weeks until today, officials of the Foreign and Defense ministries in Kabul had deferred Western reporters' requests for a trip to Jalalabad, saying that it was too risky. Direct appeal to President Najibullah were turned down for the same reason, and the only foreigners permitted to make the trip were three Soviet reporters, a correspondent for the Communist Party newspaper Pravda and a two-man tele-

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Road linking Jalalabad to Kabul
is intermittently cut by rebels.

vision crew, who visited the city in a military helicopter last month. Their visit was arranged after the Soviet Ambassador here, Yuli M. Vorontsov, agreed to accept personal responsibility.

Planning for another visit was revived last week, after a series of recent reports in Western publications that described the Jalalabad fighting as witnessed by reporters who traveled to guerrilla outposts near the city with rebel groups based in Pakistan, 50 miles to the east on the other side the Khyber Pass.

Arrangements were made, and subsequently canceled, when bad weather and guerrilla activities along the route made helicopter flights more than usually hazardous. Over the weekend, a Government offensive near Jalalabad was said to have improved conditions for the trip.

Because of concerns that plans for today's visit might reach guerrilla groups with an underground network in Kabul, reporters were awakened at their hotels at dawn and told that they would be taken by fixed-wing airplanes to two other besieged cities, Herat and Kandahar. Only on arrival at the airport, minutes before boarding the helicopter, were they told that the destination was Jalalabad. Foreign Ministry officials conveyed a last-minute assurance from the pilot, Captain Humayun of the 377th Hero Helicopter Regiment. "If the pilot sees something and shoots, don't be worried," one official said, as the helicopter's engines started. "It is normal."

Passing Dangerous Ridge

Tension aboard the MI-8 troop-carrying helicopter assigned to the reporters grew as the machine approached a ridge, a jagged saddle of mountainside about halfway to Jalalabad. Because of guerrilla concentrations either side of the ridge, which lies southeast of the town of Sorubi, the ridge has been a notorious danger point for the helicopter convoys that have frequently been the only means the Government has of reaching Jalalabad.

Although the Government asserts it controls the sinuous mountain road between the two cities, guerrillas have frequently succeeded in taking control of key sections of the road, cutting off truck convoys.

Half a mile forward, the first of six MI-24 helicopter gunships flying escort darted along the rugged terrain, looking like angry mosquitoes as they followed volleys of magnesium flares and rockets to protect the airborne convoy from suspected guerrilla positions in the gullies below. As the more cumbersome MI-8 cleared the jagged mountain rim, known among Afghan pilots as Black Ridge for the helicopters that have been attacked crossing it, the 24-year-old Captain Humayun threw his machine into a steep, diving turn, following the slope of the mountainside toward a trackless valley beyond.

On the outbound and return legs of the journey, the helicopter convoy came under attack by guerrilla rockets. But the closest of them appeared to fall some way distant from the MI-24 escort, throwing up a cloud of dust as they hit the mountainsides.

For the 10 minutes it took to cross the ridge and the wind-carved crevices and hummocks that flanked it, the only sounds in the helicopter were of its twin turbine engines, a clicking noise as the cockpit crew fired magnesium flares intended to confuse the heat-seeking devices in the Stinger missiles supplied to the guerrillas by the United States, and explosive bursts as rockets were

fired from pods slung on the helicopter's mud-splashed outriggers. Finally, Captain Humayun turned and gave a thumbs up to a passenger crouching behind him. "The worst of the danger is past," he said.

The copter landed in a field of grain on the northwestern outskirts of the city, within artillery range of guerrilla positions.

Reporters who have monitored movements out of Kabul on the road to Jalalabad, questioning soldiers and nomads arriving in the city from the east, have been told that guerrillas control sections of the road and can only be cleared from it, at intervals, by heavy bombing raids. An indication that the road is not secure was given by the routes followed by the helicopters, which flew to Jalalabad on a track that kept them well to the south of the road, and returned to Kabul on a track that took them to the north of the highway.

Food Shipments: Children Go Hungry

But the 40-year-old officer who supervises all combat operations in the Jalalabad region, Col. Gen. Mohammed Asif Dalawar, said during the visit that the city was being resupplied entirely by road, with regular truck convoys. General Dalawar said flour, rice, cooking oil and essential fuel, mainly gasoline and diesel, were reaching the city in sufficient quantities, but he refused to say how many trucks have arrived since the fighting began. "Just look at the field, you'll see the tractors working," he said. "That shows that we're getting the supplies we need."

With limited time, reporters were unable to check on the general food situation, but an elder at the Babanok Sikh temple in the old town, Darbari Singh, 70 years old — between outbursts against the United States for a rocket attack said to have killed 24 people at the temple six weeks ago — said shortages were becoming a problem among 8,000 Sikh and Hindu people in the city. "There is not enough food," he said. Pointing to a girl about 10 years old, one of several hundred people sheltering at the temple, he said: "The children are sometimes hungry."

Lack of Electric Power

Apart from Government and military vehicles, mainly jeeps, tanks and armored personnel carriers, there appeared to be little motorized transport in the city. The bus used by the reporters was the only one in evidence during the tour, and soldiers were seen commuting to their posts on bicycles. Although one stop on the tour was the city's main power plant — the Soviet plant installation nine miles west of the city that appeared to be operating normally under heavy military guard — there appeared to be no electric power at the airport or at some of the other stops on the tour.

One assertion made by Government officials, that the guerrillas have been unable to approach within 10 miles of the city from most directions, appeared to overstate the area under Government control. But the closest guerrilla positions appeared for the most part to be at least five miles from the city, and in most directions farther than that.

Guerrilla commanders have told Western reporters that their bid to capture the city could drag on for a long time. But recent reports indicate that the rebels' emphasis may be shifting from bombardment of the city, which appears to have fallen off in recent weeks, to attempts to cut off supplies. From the reporters' visits, that appeared to be the most vulnerable part of the Government's defenses.

But Captain Humayun, relaxing back at Kabul airport, dismissed suggestions that the rebels might eventually make it too tough for even the helicopters to fly. "For the defense of our homeland, we are ready to make any kind of sacrifice," he said.