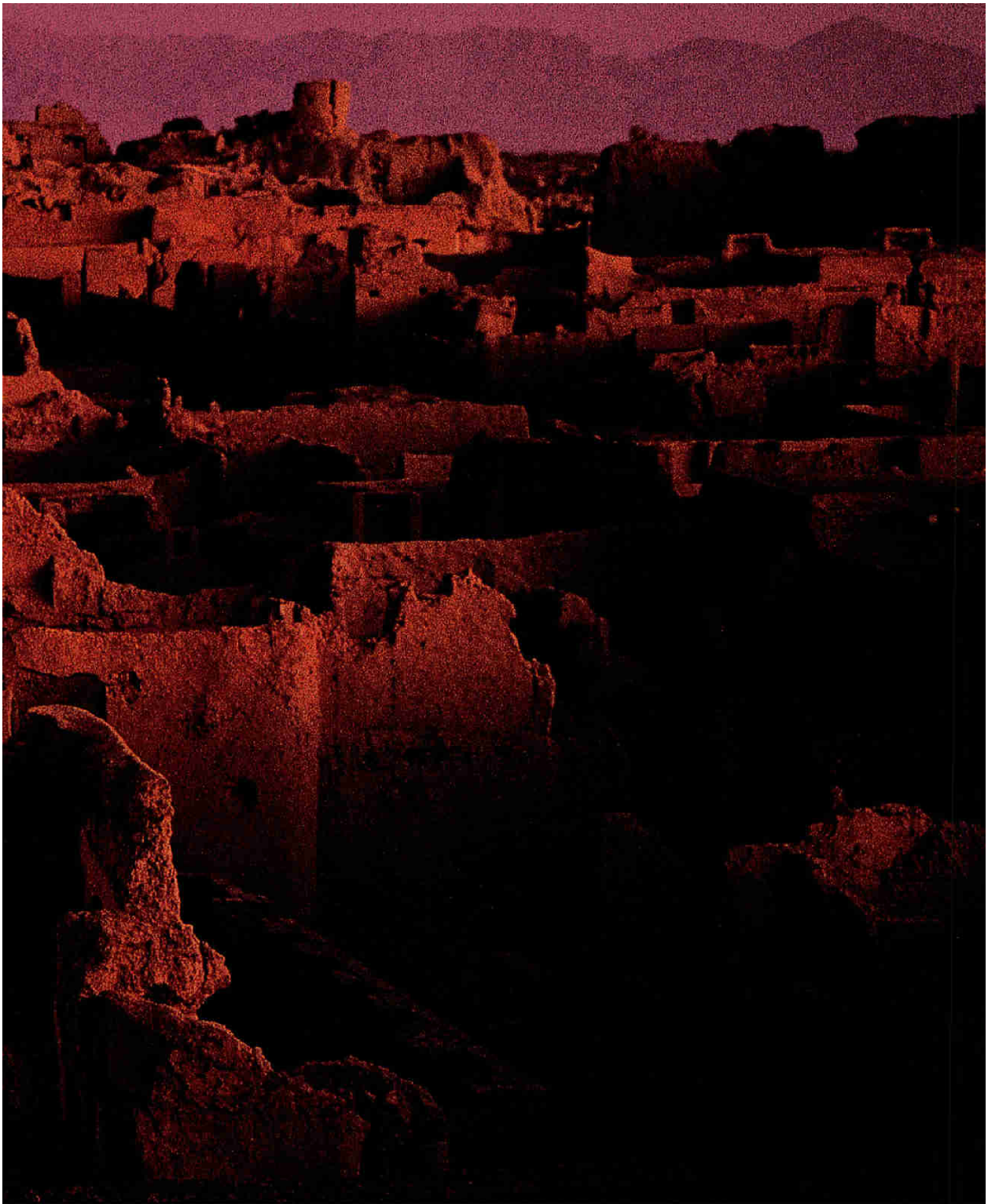


AMID THE RUBBLE OF WAR, A STRONG-WILLED PEOPLE BEGINS ANOTHER ORDEAL—

Afghanistan's

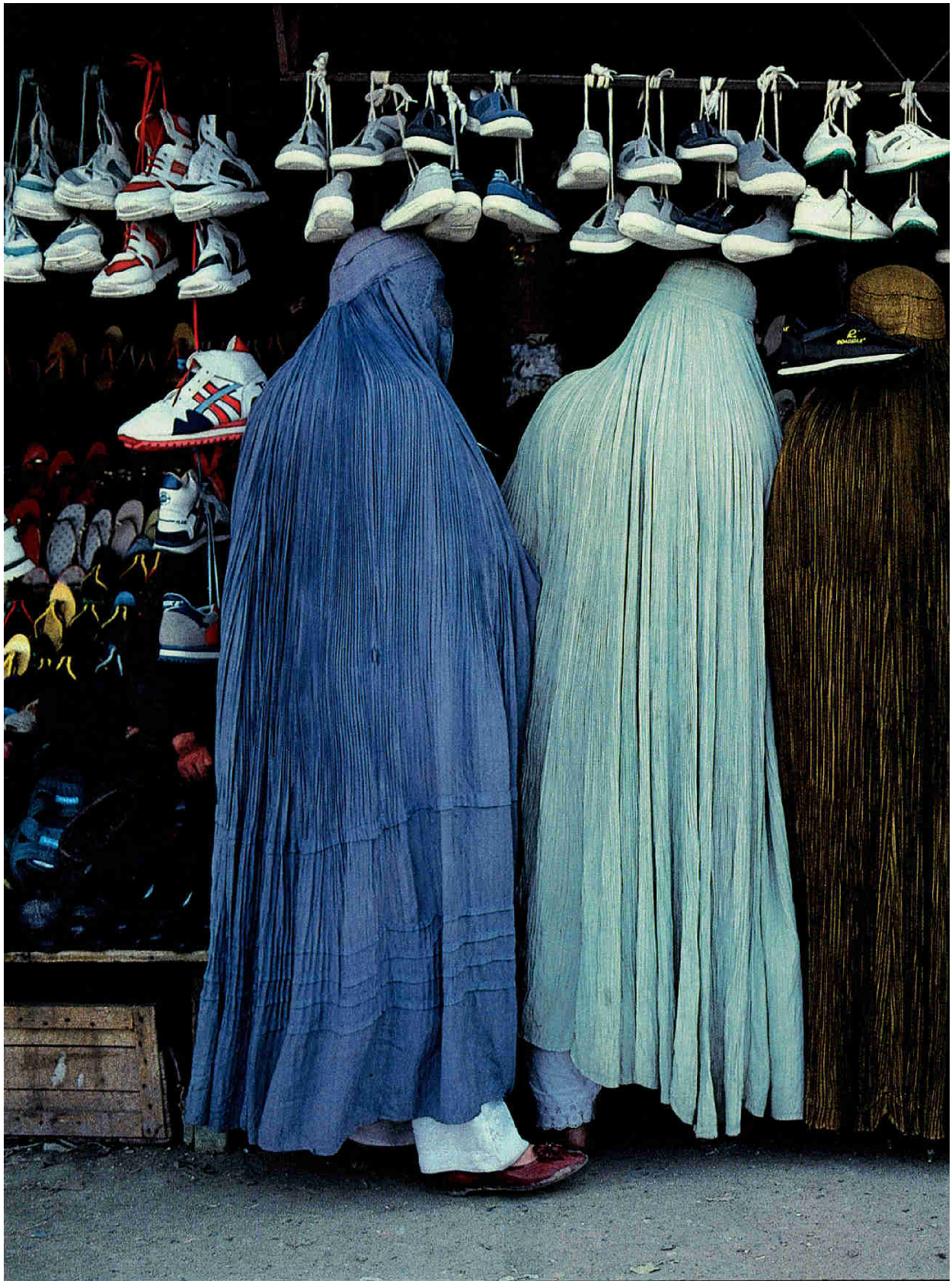
Copyright© National Geographic Society. All Rights Reserved



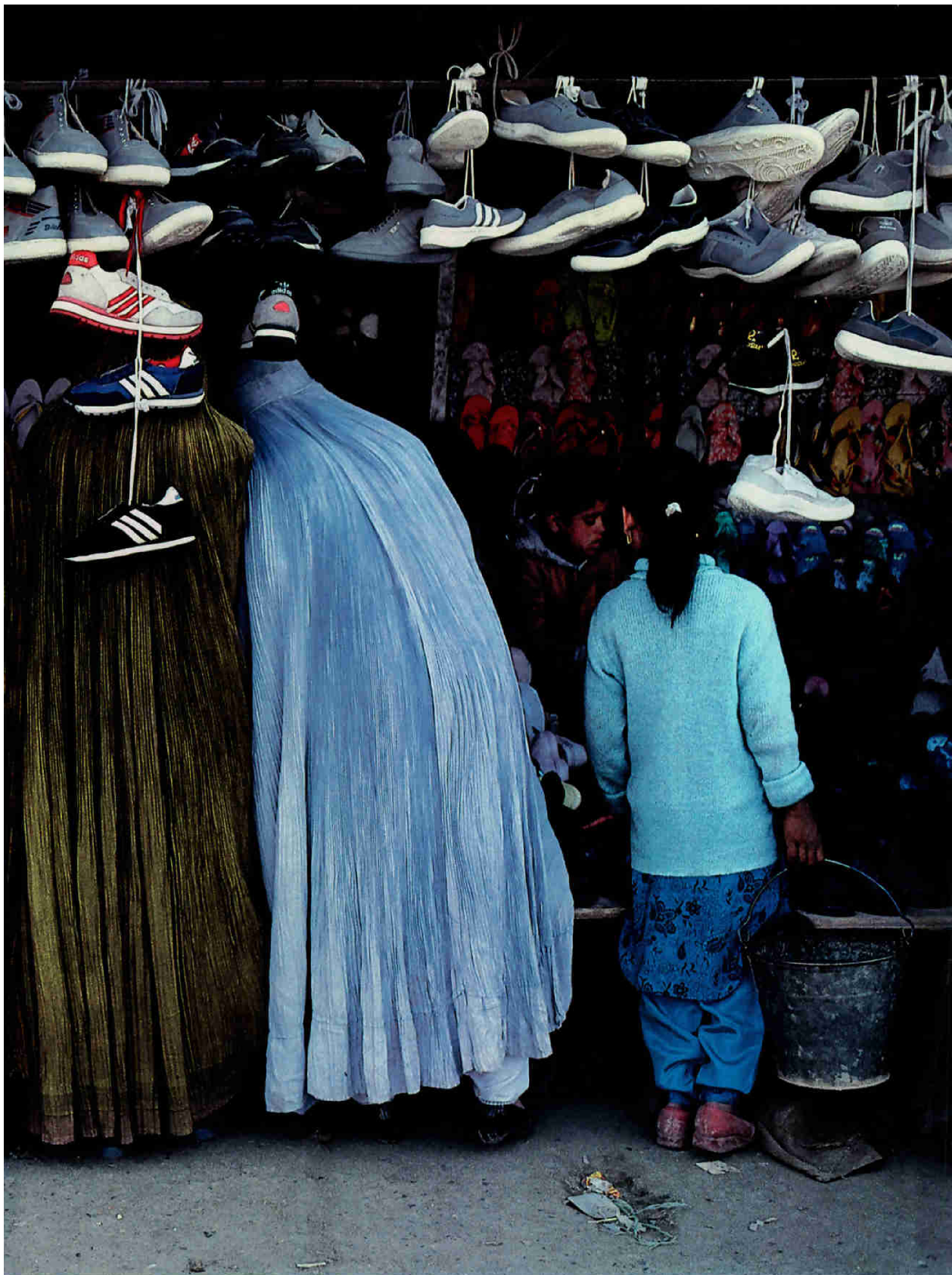
REBUILDING HERAT AND OTHER CITIES SAVAGED BY YEARS OF SOVIET BOMBS.

Uneasy Peace

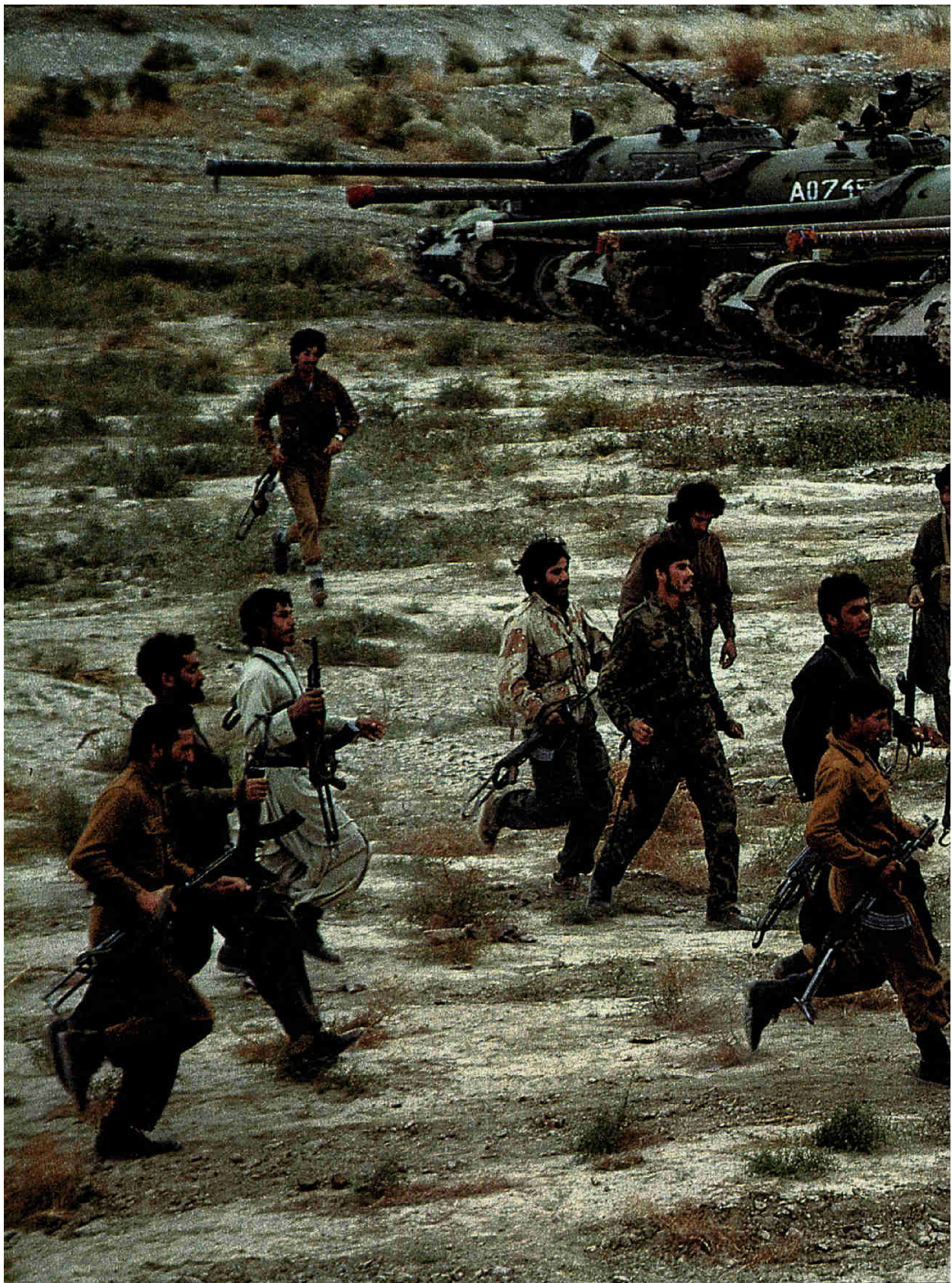
59



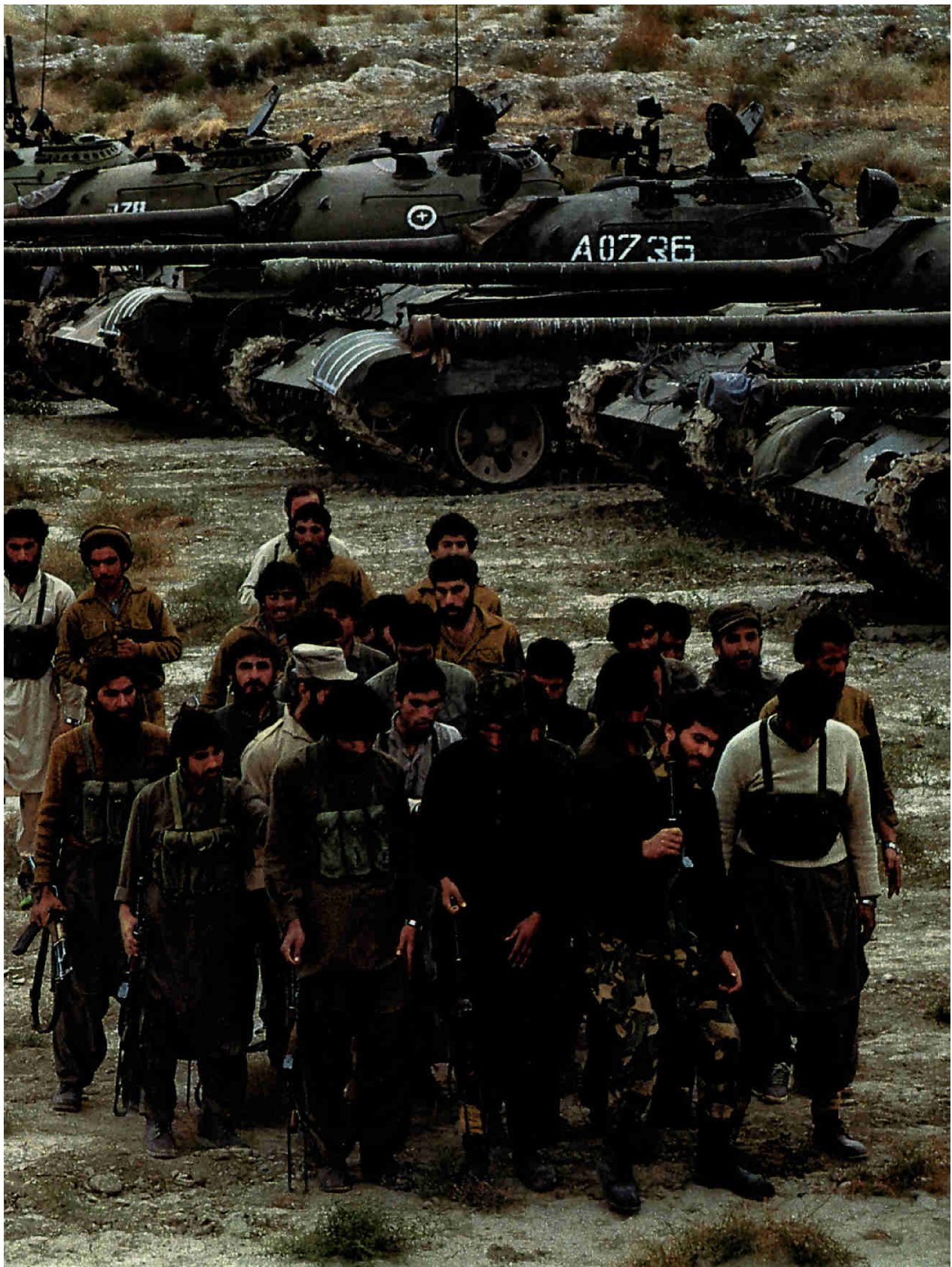
COVERED HEAD TO HEEL in the traditional chadri, shoppers in Kabul signal Afghanistan's return to fundamental Islam. Until 1959 women were pressured to conceal their bodies from all but close relatives; by the time women won



the right to vote five years later, the chadri was becoming rare in major cities. Today's leaders urge women to wear the full-length garment, although Western fashions are still for sale in the bazaars.



ENEMIES IN WAR *join forces in Afghanistan's national army, as bearded mujahidin, holy warriors, train with clean-shaven Afghan communists, whose government lasted until April 1992. The Soviet Union withdrew its troops in*



February 1989 after a decade of war killed 15,000 Soviets and a million Afghans. Thousands more have died in recent battles among mujahidin. "We're still fighting," a soldier said, "to bring peace to Afghanistan."

By RICHARD MACKENZIE
Photographs by STEVE McCURRY

THE DRIVER grasps the wheel of the rattling old Russian-built taxi, accelerates, and steers wildly around potholes and what few pedestrians are left on the streets of Kabul. We are driving through the capital of Afghanistan, where rival gangs of *mujahidin*, or Islamic guerrillas, are fighting for control. For a decade the resistance confounded the Soviet military, forcing the invaders in 1989 to withdraw from the country. Now in the spring of 1992 the guerrillas

are turning their weapons on one another.

Gunfire sounds up ahead toward big, grassy Pashtunistan Square. The pounding of heavy arms echoes through tall pines around the park in the once grand Shar-i-Nau neighborhood. Tanks blast the marbled presidential palace. Smoke rises from the smoldering, deserted barracks of the presidential guard.

In the backseat of the careening cab, my friend Ramazan frowns. "This is ridiculous," says the wizened, bankrupt, 45-year-old restaurant owner. "This is no place to be. We



can't tell one mujahidin group from another. Half the gunmen are just street thugs. We are going to die."

We would not be out here at all if I had not gotten a call saying the house I am renting has been looted. We are on our way to check the damage. This is only my second week back in Afghanistan. Since 1985 I have made a half dozen trips here as a journalist, traveling in the mountains with the guerrillas, whose fierce determination I have come to respect. Now, days after the collapse of the communist regime, it sickens me to see Kabul, the ultimate goal of the mujahidin, reduced to anarchy at their own hands.

In the hours before the mujahidin closed in,



it seemed as if every worker and shopkeeper and barrow merchant in this city of 1.5 million tried to flee to the suburbs. They packed into buses or clung to the back of pickup trucks in human pyramids. Those who couldn't ride ran. Cars full of soldiers from the Afghan Army, some stripped down to their T-shirts, joined the galloping masses. At one secret-police center, I watched men I assumed to be agents back up a truck, fill it with rugs and office furniture, and drive off in a cloud of dust.

Now we pass empty bazaars, long lines of dilapidated little shops with their shutters drawn and locked, and empty, impersonal government buildings. We turn onto a dusty, unpaved side street just wide enough for the taxi. After we bounce 50 yards or so, four men with rifles and a rocket-propelled grenade launcher step out to block our way.

"Halt," says one with wild eyes and matted hair. "Get over here. A boy is dying."

The gunmen hustle us toward a teenager lying on the ground in front of an empty fruit-and-vegetable stand, its striped, blue-and-white awning torn and snapping in the wind. The boy's left leg has been blown apart just below the knee by a rocket explosion. His lower leg hangs by shreds of flesh. The bone glares white in the blood. Quickly I take off my leather belt and cinch it tightly around his thigh to stop the bleeding. Together we lift him into the back of the taxi. His face is ghostly. His eyes roll back. He tries to speak but makes only a gurgling sound.

We head off toward the hospital of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the only medical facility in the city still operating at full strength. There we hand the boy to orderlies, who rush him to a triage area. And that is the last we ever see of him.

THE RUSSIANS ARE GONE, but rifle-toting snipers such as these Uzbek from northern Afghanistan still prowl the terraces of Kabul. Warring mujahidin groups, divided mainly along ethnic lines and supported by Iran, Pakistan, or Saudi Arabia, began jockeying for position in the new Afghan government soon after the communists fell. Within four months their shells and rockets had damaged the capital more severely than had the war between mujahidin guerrillas and the Soviet-backed communist regime.

In the confusion we have not learned the boy's name. We have no way of asking whether he will live or die. I look for him later in the corridors of men, women, and children with bullet wounds, gaping shrapnel holes, and limbs mangled by land mines. But it is hopeless. He has been swallowed up by the chaos.

ADD HIM TO THE LIST of war casualties. A million Afghans killed. Two million driven from villages. More than five million made refugees in Pakistan and Iran. In all, half the nation's people are dead, disabled, or uprooted. "The war mutilated our homeland," says Muhammad Eshaq, historian and former mujahid. "It destroyed everything. You cannot set off dynamite inside a house and not expect the windows to be broken."

The trouble began with a family quarrel in 1973. Zahir Shah, the last Afghan king, was overthrown by his envious first cousin and brother-in-law, Muhammad Daoud, who disbanded the monarchy and declared himself president. Five years later he and his family were killed in a coup by the underground Afghan Communist Party.

Irreconcilable with Afghan ways, communism never gained the support of the people. Instead the communists inspired the uprising by the mujahidin, who were well armed by the United States and Saudi Arabia with weapons smuggled in from Pakistan. In October 1979 Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin had his boss, President Noor Muhammad Taraki, smothered with a pillow. The killing took Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev and his colleagues by surprise. Fearful that a client state was on the verge of collapse, in December the aging "cold warriors" ordered the Soviet Army to invade.

The Soviets installed Babrak Karmal, a banished former Afghan ambassador and party leader, as president. Yet even with the help of 115,000 Soviet troops, including elite special forces, Karmal in seven years could not defeat the mujahidin. In May 1986 Mikhail Gorbachev replaced Karmal with the chief of

the secret police, Dr. Najibullah (like many Afghans, he has only one name). A program of national reconciliation was announced.

But it was too little too late. Frustrated by the continuing conflict, which was costing the Soviets ten billion dollars a year, Gorbachev in November decided to cut his losses and withdraw Soviet forces. Two years and a few months later the last Soviet troops were gone.

President Najibullah's position became increasingly untenable. As the situation imploded, he tried to escape. At 2 a.m. on April 16, 1992, he and a small group were stopped by Afghan militiamen as they tried to enter the airport in four blue-and-white vehicles with UN flags flying.

"We are under orders. No one leaves or enters the airport," a young captain told him. Najibullah said he just wanted to see his wife and children, who had already fled to India. But the captain did not budge.

"A lot of people would like to see their families," he replied coldly. He turned the president away. Later that morning, Najibullah took sanctuary in a UN office building in Kabul. The communist era was over.

THE AFGHAN PEOPLE will not soon forget the abuses at the hands of the communist regime. Conservative estimates place the number of "disappeareds," or people dragged away by the secret police and never seen again, at 35,000 or more.

Many were taken to the Pul-i-Charkhi prison, a stone fortress outside Kabul's eastern suburbs, which rises from a bleak plain like a ghost ship on a dead sea. Built by Czechoslovakia in the mid-1970s, it holds as many as 20,000 inmates—perhaps the largest prison in south Asia. It was also, say human rights groups, a place where torture and atrocities were practiced for more than a decade.

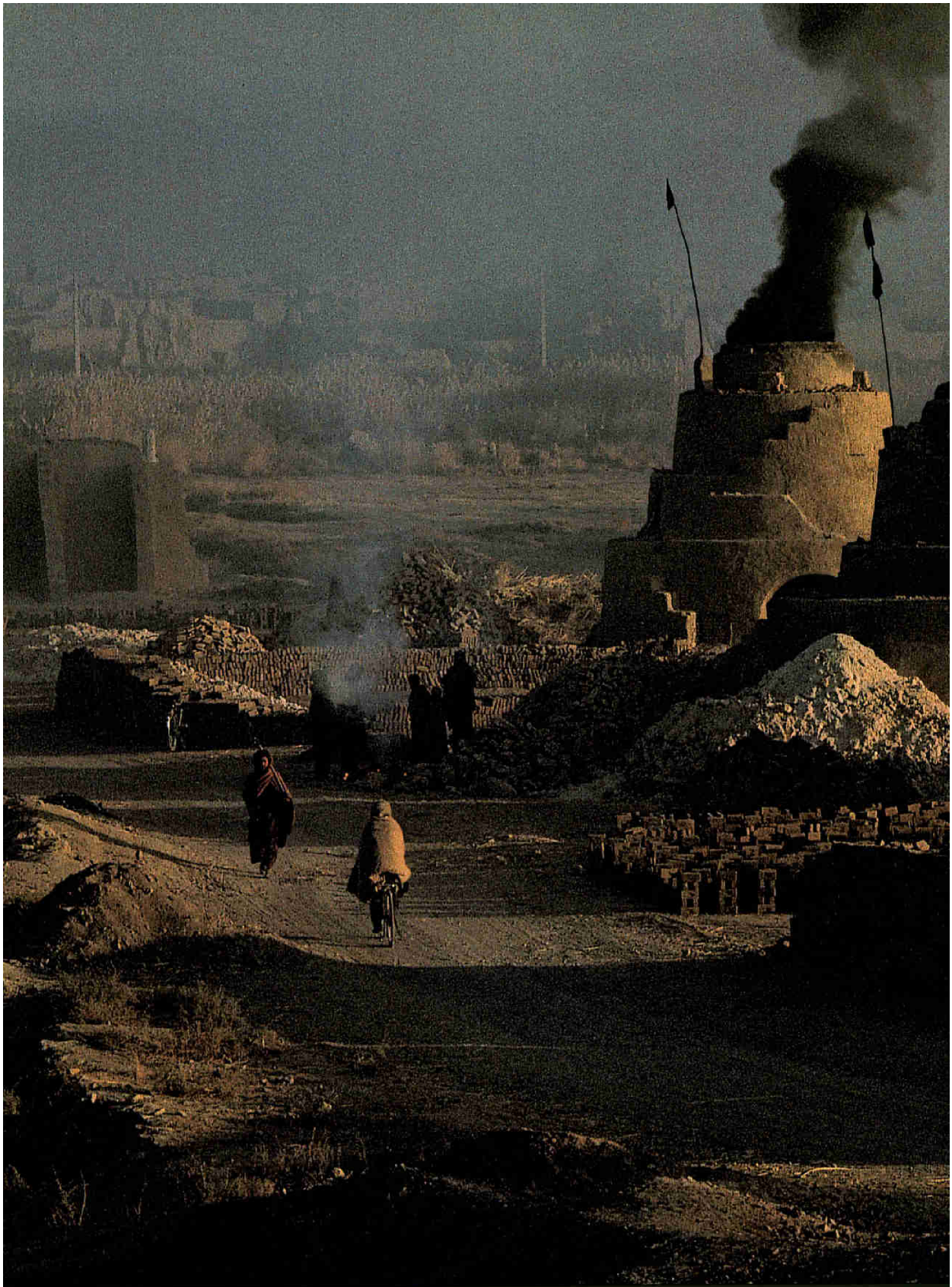
On the eve of what would have been the 14th anniversary of the communist coup, I drive out to the prison, where I find a scene of madness. Sadar Muhammad, an Interior Ministry colonel, is struggling to maintain control of the prison's criminal wing while at the same time trying to empty it, under orders from the dreaded secret police (known as KhAD), as a gesture of goodwill toward the populace. But inmates, confused by rumors, are on the verge of rioting. A fire truck stands ready at the huge steel gates.

RICHARD MACKENZIE, editor-in-chief of Global News Service, based in Washington, D. C., is an authority on Afghanistan who has made numerous treks across that country in the past eight years. STEVE MCCURRY's photographs of the Afghan frontier appeared in the June 1985 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC. His most recent story for the magazine was on Sunset Boulevard in the June 1992 issue.

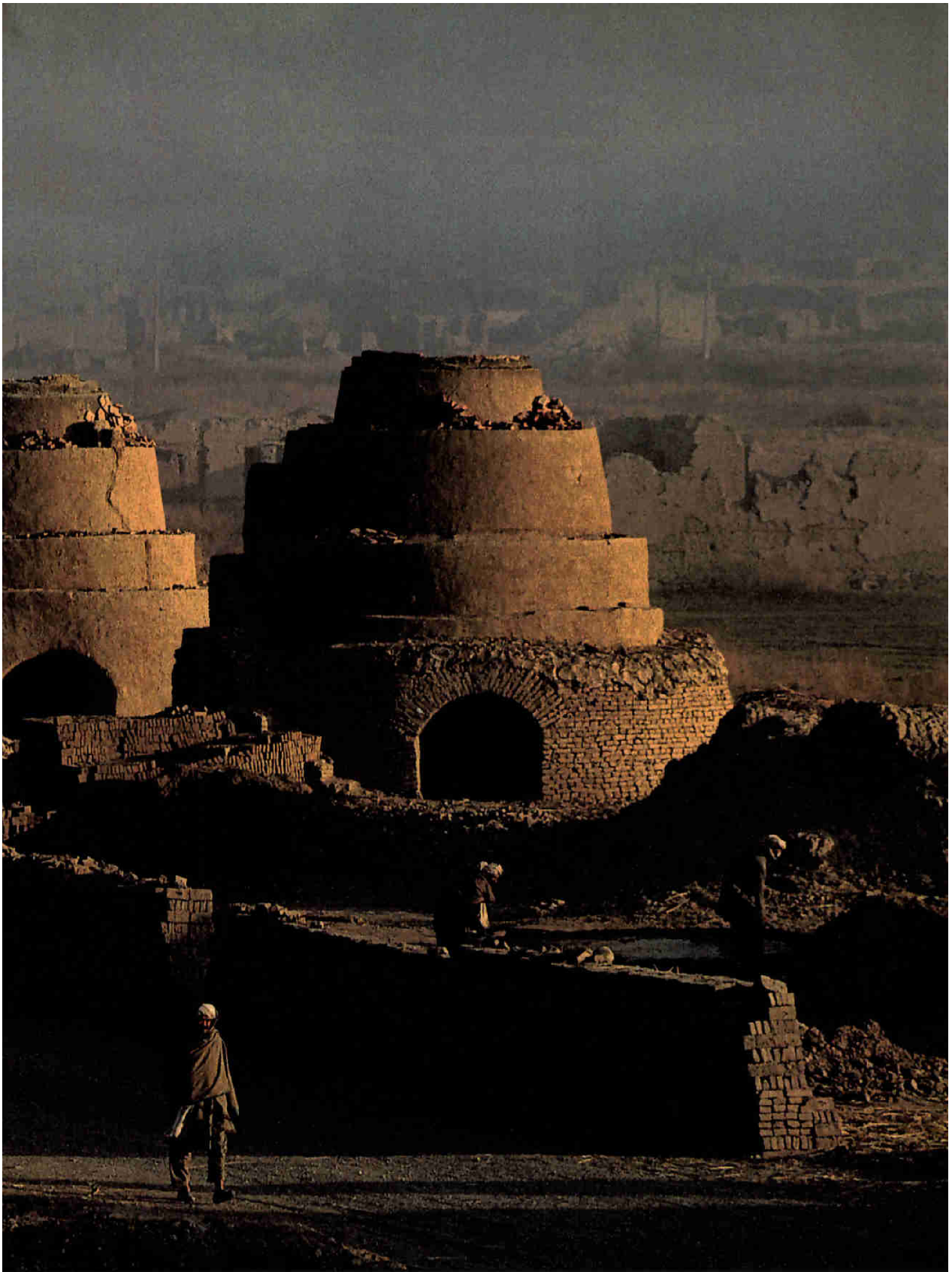


TRAMPLED BY INVADERS since the rule of Cyrus the Great in the sixth century B.C., Afghanistan served as a trading crossroads between the Middle East and the rest of Asia. Kabul (above) became the capital 28 years after the founding of the modern state in 1747. Swarming with refugees during the Soviet occupation, Kabul has since seen a third of its 1.5 million people flee mujahidin rockets.





BRICK BY BRICK, residents of the southern city of Qandahar—until recently Afghanistan's largest city after Kabul—are rebuilding homes leveled by war, using bricks of soft mud fired in conical kilns outside town. Such kilns are



working overtime in most major cities: Two million refugees have returned to Afghanistan from Iran, Pakistan, and other points abroad, and their reconstruction efforts depend on a steady supply of bricks.

"You can go in there if you want," Sadar tells me. "But you must swear I warned you not to go. None of my men can go with you."

I enter the exercise yard of Block 3, and a crowd presses against me.

"Is it true that they are letting people go? This is not a trick?" asks Zar Alam, a slight, soft-spoken, but intense 28-year-old, who, like most of the others, is wearing pajama-style tribal clothing.

It is true, I say, then make my way to the political side of the prison, where I discover Col. Ali Ahmad, a KhAD official, still in his office.

"This heat is unbearable," he says, sweating profusely in his heavy, brown woolen winter uniform, buttoned to the neck. "But headquarters has not yet given the order to switch to our summer uniforms." He neglects to mention that the head of KhAD committed suicide the day before.

Mopping his brow, the colonel leads the way through low, dark concrete halls to the eight-by-ten-foot cell of 29-year-old Muhammad Arif. Shuffling to his feet, Arif bows a little to the colonel, then stands rigid. He is serving four years for "economic sabotage," he says.

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"Economic sabotage," he repeats.

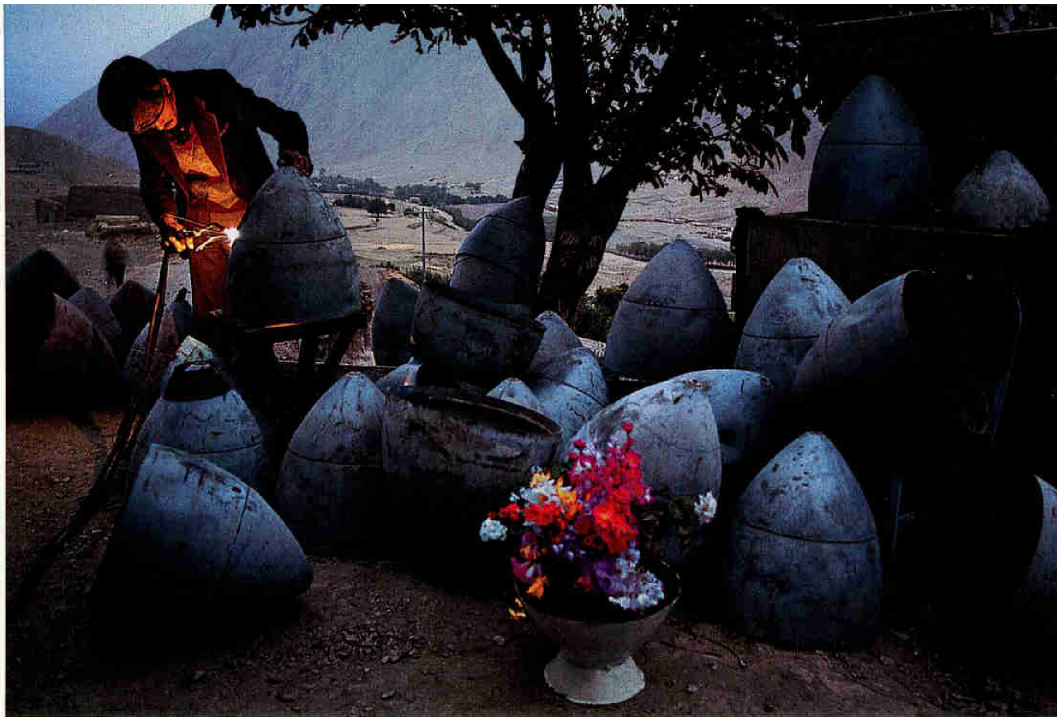
"But what did you do?"

"I don't know," he says, looking sideways at the colonel.

In another cell, built for 30, I find 72 prisoners, their double bunks crammed together. One inmate gives me a pendant in the shape of a bird, intricately carved from a black stone with fine white veins. The bird's wings are swept back. It is soaring free. Walking out of the cell, I hold the trinket in my palm and feel tears welling in my eyes.

"May I ask you a favor?" says a senior





UP TO THEIR ANKLES in mud, villagers near Qandahar clear accumulated silt from a karez, or underground irrigation channel. Farmers impatient for water to flow can turn to the country's most lucrative crop, the opium poppy, which thrives on little moisture. No water at all is needed by gardener Hesamuddin, who pots plastic flowers (above) in the shells of Soviet bombs before placing them along the streets of Kayan.

prison official as I walk to my car. He is clean-shaven and dressed in a KhAD uniform. "I would be grateful for a ride back to Kabul for myself and an inmate who has just been released." He nods at a younger man with a bushy beard and flowing cotton tribal clothes, who is clutching his few possessions wrapped in a *pattu*, a flimsy blanket with fringes at each end. "He is my nephew. I am taking him home with me," the official says. As we drive, the young man stares hard at the first grass he has seen in 11 years.

All across the country Afghans are going home. From the rolling wheat fields of the northern steppes to the imposing deserts of the south, from the mountain gorges of the east to the endless plains of the west, refugees are returning to places, outside the capital, that are tranquil for the first time in 14 years. They are coming back to pick up the pieces.



"We spent eight years in a camp in Pakistan," says Abdul Ansari, a 43-year-old teacher holding his three-year-old daughter with one hand and with the other a bar on the roof of the bus from the airport to Herat in northwestern Afghanistan. The bus is no more than a truck with a steel-plated box on the back. Inside the cage some 30 of us sweat and sway as the vehicle bounces along an asphalt road built by the Soviets but ruined by their tanks. Majestic pines stand sentry along the road. Beyond them, bare yellow plains shimmer as they reach northeast to mountains.

"That time in Pakistan was eight years longer than I wanted," Ansari says. "Three of my children were born there. I was so happy to leave. My children need to be back here. Perhaps I can teach again."

Herat, an ancient city near the border with Iran that rose to prominence about 1500 B.C., has been razed and rebuilt countless times over the centuries. It fell to the Achaemenid armies of Cyrus and Darius 500 years before Christ. A century and a half later, Alexander the Great built a major city here. Arab invaders brought Islam to the region in the mid-seventh century A.D. When the inhabitants resisted the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan in the 13th century, he was said to have killed all but a dozen people. Russia and the British in India vied for control of Afghanistan during the 19th century—the "Great Game" popularized by Rudyard Kipling. British troops fought three wars with the Afghans and lost each time.

For sheer destruction, however, no invaders of the past approached what the Soviet Union and the Afghan communist regime did to the modern city of Herat during the 1980s.

"Believe me when I tell you that 24,000 people were martyred in one day," says

Muhammad Ismael Khan, a former army officer turned mujahidin leader. A learned, gentle man, with a graying beard and a rakish black-and-white turban, he describes the day in March 1979 when some 200,000 people converged on the city to demonstrate against the rising communist movement in Kabul. "The Soviet-backed regime met the protesters with brutal force, and the demonstration became a riot. Armed with knives and machetes, mobs tracked down 60 Soviet advisers and their families and killed them all. They carried some of their heads through the streets on poles."

The Kabul regime, backed by fighter bombers based in the Soviet Union, began the revenge immediately. Muhammad Shah, a former history student turned guerrilla, takes me out into the city to show me the results. For mile after mile, we drive past inconceivable devastation. A community that once held 150,000 people looks as if it has been hit by a nuclear bomb. Three-fourths of the buildings are flattened to rubble. Bomb craters the size of swimming pools yawn on one side of us. Hills of mud or concrete that once were homes squat on the other. At many of the sites flags flutter on sticks to announce that the family that lived there never was dug out.

"If we were walking, we could not see it all in a month," Muhammad Shah says.

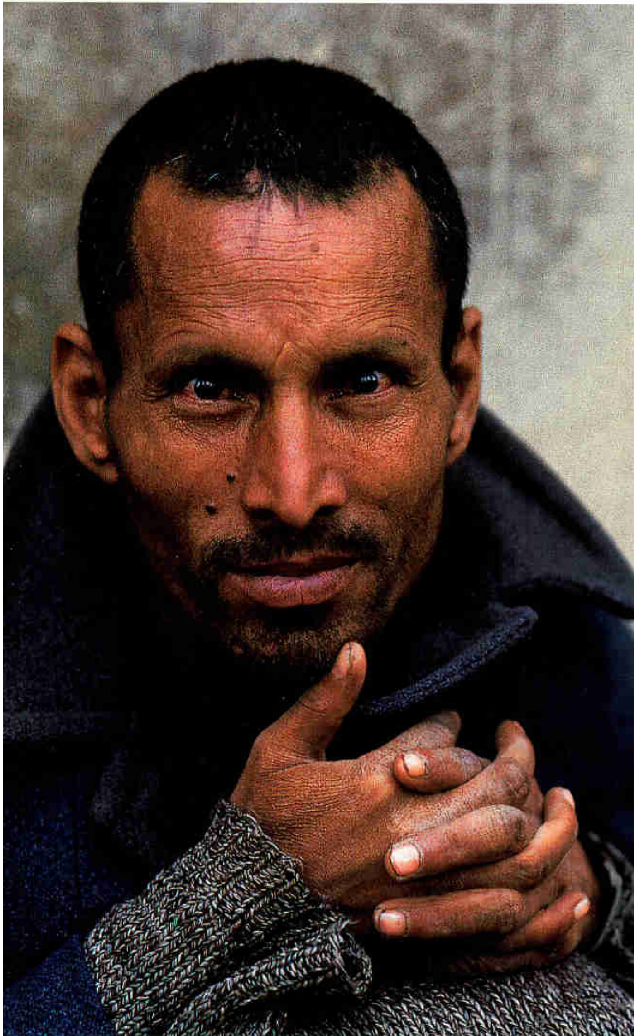
ON THE WEST SIDE of town, a man named Azimi and eight friends are working a labor of love. They are clearing out the place where a mosque once stood. While some dig and haul out earth and trash, others pack mud bricks to be baked in the sun. Leaning on his shovel, Azimi offers an enthusiastic, gap-toothed grin.

"I love what I am doing," he says, his skin and clothes covered with dirt. "This is for God and for Herat. We hope to have the mosque ready for prayer before winter."

Four young men in camouflage, former mujahidin, squat beside large rocks near what was left of the famed Timurid minarets in northern Herat, symbols of the lost wealth of Islamic culture. Built in the 15th century by Queen Gawhar Shad, the minarets—there were once ten of the elegant towers—soar above the ruins of a complex that included a mosque, hospital, covered bazaar, and madrasah, or Muslim school.

"There were more books in this madrasah

GRAZED BY A STRAY BULLET, two-year-old Muhammad Abdul Waheed recovers at Karte Seh Surgical Hospital in Kabul. Bullets rained down as jubilant mujahidin celebrated by firing into the air when the communists left Kabul. The factional fighting that ensued filled beds in Karte Seh and other Kabul hospitals with civilian casualties—some, like Muhammad, the victims of guns shot randomly. Says weary administrator Gul Muhammad: "All the patients here are just waiting for the fighting to stop."



WAR'S TOLL ON THE PSYCHE is etched on faces at Marastun, a shelter for the mentally ill in Kabul. Afghans tell of relatives gone mad from years of dodging bombs or being forced to fight alongside Soviets against the mujahidin. Patients here are kept off the streets—sophisticated psychiatric care is unheard of—but not always out of danger from rocket fire. The most basic medical services are stretched thin in Afghanistan, one of the world's poorest countries even before the war.

than in all the rest of Afghanistan," Muhammad Shah boasts.

The men are painting the rocks red to mark an area planted with land mines by the communists—a common problem all over Afghanistan. The Soviets mined parks to restrict the movement of city people. In the country they mined fields to prevent farmers from growing crops for guerrillas. They dropped mines from aircraft into valleys and mountain passes, and

mined the sides of roads to prevent ambushes. "They say there could be as many as 30 million land mines left in Afghanistan by the Russians," a former mujahid tells me. "No one really knows."

Earthquakes and earlier wars collapsed several of the Timurid minarets, which were covered in rich blue tiles. By the late 1970s, only six still stood. Four and a half now remain, bare of their tiles, rising out of the tall



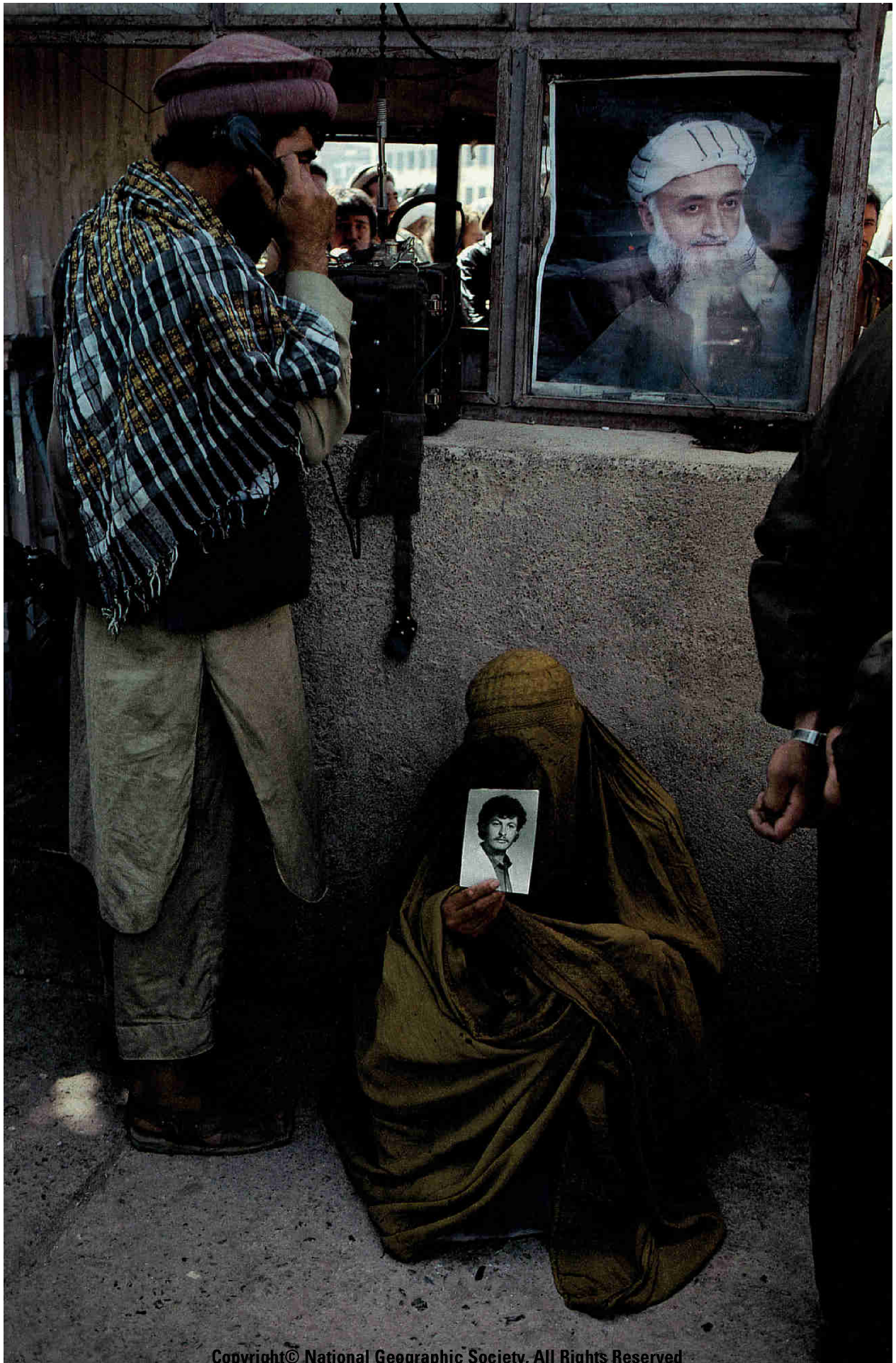
weeds and minefields like charred fingers.

"This was once a beautiful park where people came for picnics," Muhammad Shah says, pointing to a weed-infested field beside the minarets. Walking ahead, he swings the artificial limb where his left leg was before he lost it to a mine three years ago. "We will make it beautiful again. *Inshallah*—God willing."

IN CONTRAST to the rubble in Herat, the city of Taloqan bustles with life. Men stroll and children play in a big green park in the center of this dusty community of 30,000 tucked into the brown hills of Takhar Province in northern Afghanistan. At the window of a government building a handyman, holding little nails in his mouth, replaces a cracked pane. A girl in a quiet

neighborhood fills a battered aluminum bucket with water from a public well, then disappears behind a wall into her mud-brick house.

Like Kabul, Taloqan was occupied for a decade by the Soviet Army and forces of the communist regime. When the communists were driven out of this area in 1988, two mujahidin leaders vied for control in a struggle that in part reflected a rivalry between clans and regions. Half the city was seized by Ahmad Shah Massoud, the mysterious, charismatic military commander of Jamiat-i-Islami, or Society of Islam, a guerrilla group based in the northeastern provinces, where the Tajik are the largest ethnic group. The other half was grabbed by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the extremist, anti-Western leader of Hezb-i-Islami, or Party of Islam, one of six major groups





CLINGING TO SLIM HOPE, a desperate mother searching for a son missing in action waits outside the presidential palace (left) as a sympathetic guard tries to arrange a meeting for her with officials. The formal authority of President Burhanuddin Rabbani, in the portrait, doesn't always translate into order in the streets of Kabul, where a mujahidin fighter (above) parades a looter to jail. Guns abound in Afghanistan, in part the result of three billion dollars in U. S. war-time aid. Washington now wants to buy back antiaircraft missiles, fearing that mujahidin will use them to help install strict Islamic governments in the Middle East.

aspiring to represent the Pashtun, the ethnic group dominating the south. After many bloody weeks, Massoud's forces prevailed.

Today the only guns to be seen in Taloqan are on a poster at the movie house for a forthcoming film starring Sylvester Stallone. Mujahidin who visit the city are barred from bringing in their weapons.

"If they want to come in here to have some ice cream or to meet some friends, they must leave their weapons at the base," says Jalili, a policeman wearing tribal dress.

As soon as the fighting stopped, the citizens of Taloqan began forming committees. They did it with abandon. There were committees for every imaginable need from education to health care, from power supplies to mine clearance. Yet before they could rebuild a future, they had to overcome past ethnic animosities.

At a meeting of the Committee for Reconstruction, a dozen men sit on cushions in a big room with pale green concrete walls at

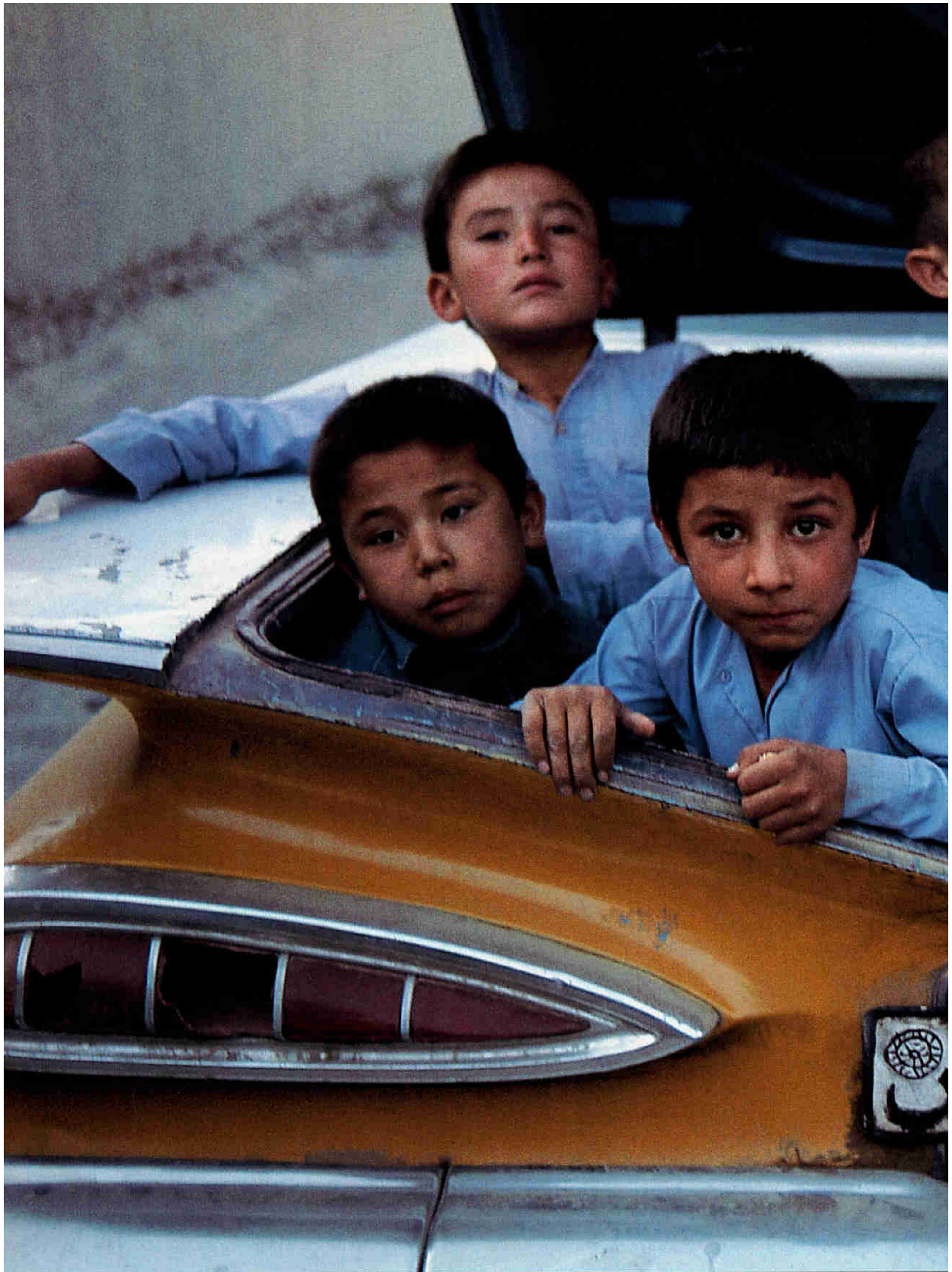
provincial headquarters. The older men sit in front on burgundy carpets, with the younger men in back. Their faces tell the story of Afghan history, of the invaders who shaped its ethnic diversity. Some have the dark skin and shrewd eyes of bygone Mongol invaders. Others wear the warrior-like scowl of the Pashtun, while some have the thin, aquiline noses of Tajik scholars.

On the agenda today are questions of aid for returning refugees, repairs to the power plant, and the state of a bridge on the outskirts of town.

"If we don't do something about it soon, someone is going to fall through it and drown in the river," explains one committee member of the bridge. "How will you feel then?"

"I don't care how many people use it or where it is; it must be repaired," grumbles another. "Have you seen it?"

"I wouldn't walk across it myself," barks a third.



CROWDING INTO THE TRUNK while adult relatives ride up front, boys in Kabul settle in for an open-air taxi ride across town. The mosaic of their faces reflects the ethnic mix of both Kabul and the nation: Afghanistan's main



groups are the dominant Pashtun and the Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara, but many Afghans count residents of the capital—where intermarriage is more common than elsewhere—as a people apart, the Kabulis.



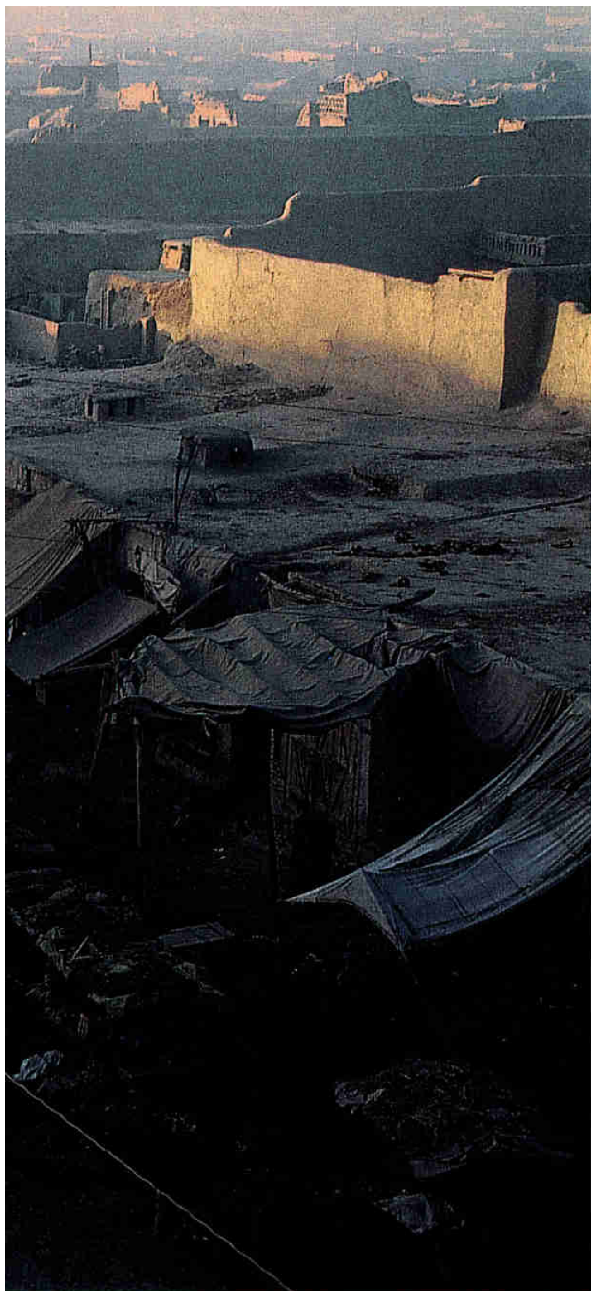
They are all talking at the same time. This is how decisions are traditionally made in Afghanistan. The council form of governing is the glue that has held the country together since Ahmad Shah Durrani came to power in 1747. He conquered cities from Herat to the Indus River, creating the modern nation. Afghanistan has never been more than a patchwork of isolated regions separated by mountainous terrain and differences in language and religion. When the communists tried to reshape the country into a centrally run state like the Soviet Union, they were turning their backs on centuries of Afghan history.

"We have to show people in other parts of

Afghanistan as well as the Muslim and the Western worlds that we can work together," says Muhammad Hasham, director of mine clearing in Taloqan. "We hope councils such as this can provide a model."

As I walk down the main street one afternoon, I pass a half dozen old men at a sidewalk restaurant, their headdresses marking different clans. Several of them smile, asking me to join them for tea. I thank them but keep walking. It is the 14th offer of tea I have received today. We are only 150 miles from Kabul, where rival groups are still killing one another. Yet it seems like another planet.

"May you not be tired," the oldest man



MUFFLED FOOTSTEPS accompany the dawn in dusty Qandahar, historic home of Afghan kings. Since the war ended, feuding mujahidin groups have centered their battles in Kabul, freeing the provinces to begin recovery. Later in the day shoppers will crowd the ramshackle bazaar stalls on this street.

I FIND MORE SIGNS OF HOPE in the rugged Panjshir Valley. The roar of the mighty Panjshir, or “five lions,” envelops us as we drive our jeep through the narrow, mountainous valley. My companions are an unlikely crew: a former Afghan Army sergeant and three former mujahidin. We are on a journey to find peace, chase ghosts, and exorcise a few demons.

The Panjshir, like other waterways in northeastern Afghanistan, cascades from the Hindu Kush, whose peaks tower 15,000 feet or higher. But no other valley matches the strategic importance of the 70-mile-long Panjshir, which points straight down at Kabul like an arrow. For that reason, the Soviets launched nine major offensives in the Panjshir from 1980 to 1986 in a vain effort to destroy the elusive mujahidin.

The guerrillas in our group are former members of an eight-man squad from the Panjshir Battalion of the front led by Ahmad Shah Massoud. Their squad leader, a self-effacing 26-year-old named Nasrullah, is heading home to the village of Hambia halfway up the valley. Nineteen-year-old Ashraf, who looks as though he has stepped from the pages of a Banana Republic fashion spread, is also returning to Hambia. His combat fatigues are always clean and pressed. His boots seem never to gather dust. The third, 29-year-old Faizuddin, has seen the worst. As a teenager he was tortured by the secret police and dragged off to Pul-i-Charkhi prison. Released after 18 months, he returned home to the village of Qalacha in the lower Panjshir Valley to find that both his elder brothers were dead. One was shot and killed while resisting arrest. The other died when Soviet soldiers tied a mine to his stomach and exploded it.

Only Nasrat, the 30-year-old former Afghan Army sergeant, is not going home. His journey up the Panjshir is an anguished search for his lost brother, who was stationed at Peshghur in a garrison overrun by mujahidin.

says, raising an aged hand. “God bless you.”

I stop to lean against a willow tree. A bamboo birdcage with a canary hangs from a branch. Above the shops across the street, the sky glows crimson and yellow with the setting sun. To the west I see the faint outline of a crescent moon. The peaceful sound of a muezzin, calling the faithful to prayer, fills the air. At Herat I had seen what Afghanistan has lost. Here I perceive hope. If the people of Taloqan can iron out their differences and lay a foundation of trust, then so can residents of Qandahar in the endless southern desert, or citizens of bombed-out Jalalabad in the east, or even survivors of the chaos in Kabul.



PROFITING FROM ISLAM'S STRICTURES *against trading money, Sikhs and Hindus run currency-exchange kiosks in Kabul, where trader Varian Singh (above) even cashes personal checks drawn on U. S. banks. Afghan bride Hasina Muhammad Sayed wears green, the traditional Islamic color of hope, for her wedding to Sharif Muhammadzai, while a cameraman capturing the moment for relatives abroad preserves tradition with a modern touch.*

Nasrat is hoping to find some hint that he is alive, perhaps being held prisoner.

"To this day our mother refuses to believe that he is dead," Nasrat says. "Every week she washes, presses, and folds his clothes along with the rest of the household laundry. I do not think her heart can take it much longer."

Remnants of the war litter the landscape as we drive. The rusty wreckage of one Soviet tank is surrounded by a field of wheat. Another tank lies submerged in the river, its nose and

gun pointed up as if gasping for air. There are countless more.

At the end of the first day we reach the house of Nasrullah's parents in Hambia. Inside, Nasrullah and his father, Muhammad Amin, sit cross-legged on long cushions lining the walls of the common room, staring at each other. Nasrullah's mother has made pink-and-white covers to celebrate Id al-Adha, a joyous Islamic festival. For 20 minutes Nasrullah and his father do not speak. They



just sit, smiling and absorbing each other by the glow of hurricane lamps.

"After all these years my family can be together again," Muhammad Amin says finally. "I have waited for this day for so long. I have prayed for this day. I have dreamed about it. I wondered if it would ever come."

The night is punctuated with visits from friends and neighbors. All simple farmers and all men, they come one after another to hug Nasrullah and sit for half an hour or so to pepper him with questions.

"Have you seen my son?" one asks.

"What are those fools doing in Kabul now?" another asks.

"Did they really release everyone from Pul-i-Charkhi?"

The next morning Ashraf and I go strolling in the hills. Two fat cows plod up a slope ahead of us. For the first time, the lad is not carrying his automatic rifle or the weight of ammunition. He stops and breaks off a piece of an acacia bush, smelling its exquisite fragrance. We talk about what will happen to young men like him, a whole generation of Afghans who have known nothing but war.

"I just want to come back here and work in the fields," Ashraf says. "I wouldn't care if I never see Kabul again. This is my country."

Ashraf stares off toward Safid Kuh, the "white mountain" on the border with Pakistan that is mantled in snow all year. The valley here is about a mile wide. Bowing poplar trees line the banks of the river. The floor of the valley is covered with square plots of farmland in differing shades of green. A gentle wind



comes from the northwest, rippling fields of wheat like ocean waves.

We wander down to the road, where scores of Kuchi, nomads who have crisscrossed Afghanistan for centuries, are driving sheep north for summer grazing. Irrigation canals destroyed in the Soviet attacks again gurgles with fresh water. As the animals sweep by, Ashraf leans over and picks up a newborn lamb and hugs it.

Back at the house Nasrullah bows and kisses his father's hands.

"I will be back soon," he says. "But first I have a promise to keep." With Ashraf and Faizuddin, he has vowed to take Nasrat, the former army sergeant, to look for his brother up in Peshghur.

Late in the afternoon of the second day we drive into Peshghur, a shady outpost where the valley narrows. We enter the town with some trepidation, not knowing what we will find. As we drive past the ruins of the garrison where Nasrat's brother was last seen alive, it becomes obvious that the fighting was gruesome. The former sergeant stares out the window, then starts to tremble. Finally, he slumps forward, sobbing, and buries his face in his hands.

No one in the jeep speaks. Then, from his seat beside Nasrat, Ashraf wraps his arms around his former enemy's shoulders, pulling him to his chest. He holds him, and Nasrat weeps softly for the next 15 minutes.

At what was once a mujahidin base in Barak, Nasrullah takes Nasrat to meet a red-bearded mullah who is the keeper of the books of prisoners.

"They have all long since been released," he tells Nasrat and takes him by the arm to a shed beside the house, where Nasrat frantically searches through the lists of those who lived to be prisoners. His brother's name is not there. The mullah offers tea.

Nasrat tries but cannot drink. "Go home and pray," the mullah says.

After dinner at a smoky tea shop that night, Faizuddin, the former torture victim, takes Nasrat out for a walk in a grove of trees. A full moon lights the natural park, and the scent of juniper wafts in the air.

"Give it up," Faizuddin says. "Your brother is gone, and you are only tormenting yourself. I know from my own experience that the past must be buried. You must live for the future. The past will kill you."

That night, Faizuddin and Nasrat begin a lasting friendship. What Faizuddin does not tell Nasrat is that he took part in the attack on the Peshghur garrison.

POKING THROUGH RUBBLE *for precious stones, emerald miners work a tunnel in the Hindu Kush mountains, 70 miles northeast of Kabul. Gem dealers say Afghan emeralds are among the world's most beautiful and could earn much needed cash for reconstruction. But primitive and dangerous mining techniques, such as using explosives from leftover Soviet bombs to blast away limestone, destroy much of the cache.*



I THINK ABOUT THESE MEN often in my travels throughout Afghanistan. They symbolize the nation's challenges. If they can come to grips with one another, then anything is possible.

I recall the words of historian Muhammad Eshaq. "This was not a war of brother against brother," he told me, "but of right against wrong. We accept all our brothers now."

On a summer evening shortly after a new Islamic government took power, I go for a walk with Commander Muslim, chief of security to Defense Minister Ahmad Shah Massoud. A dignified, broad-shouldered man, Muslim wears a soft smile on his round face. We stroll behind Massoud's house, the

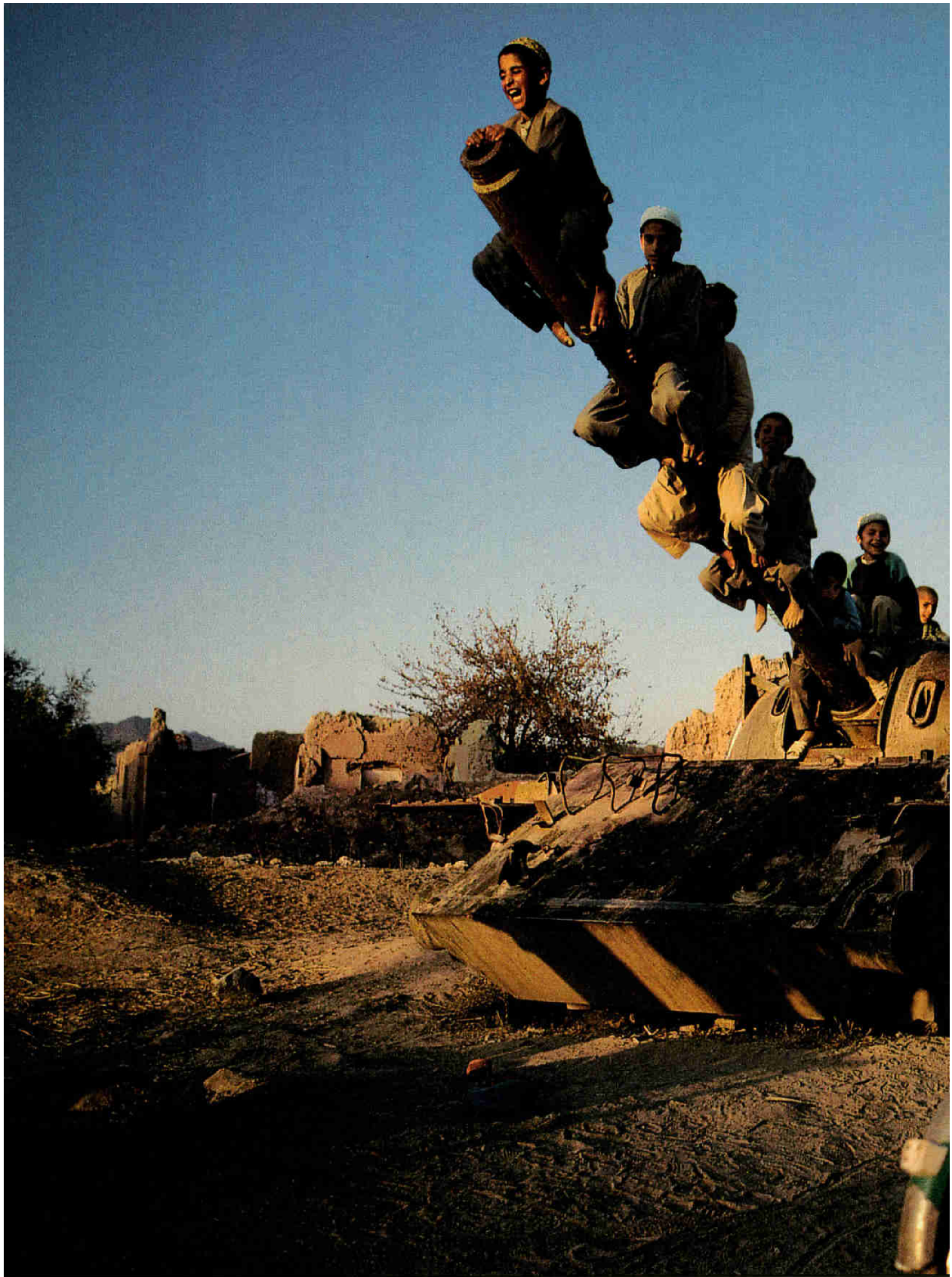
former guesthouse of President Najibullah, laughing at the trash still piled up from the days when communism reigned. One box used to hold Highland Cream Scotch Whisky. Another crated Arkhi, "The Original Mongolian Vodka."

"There won't be much of that with this Islamic government," he says with a chuckle.

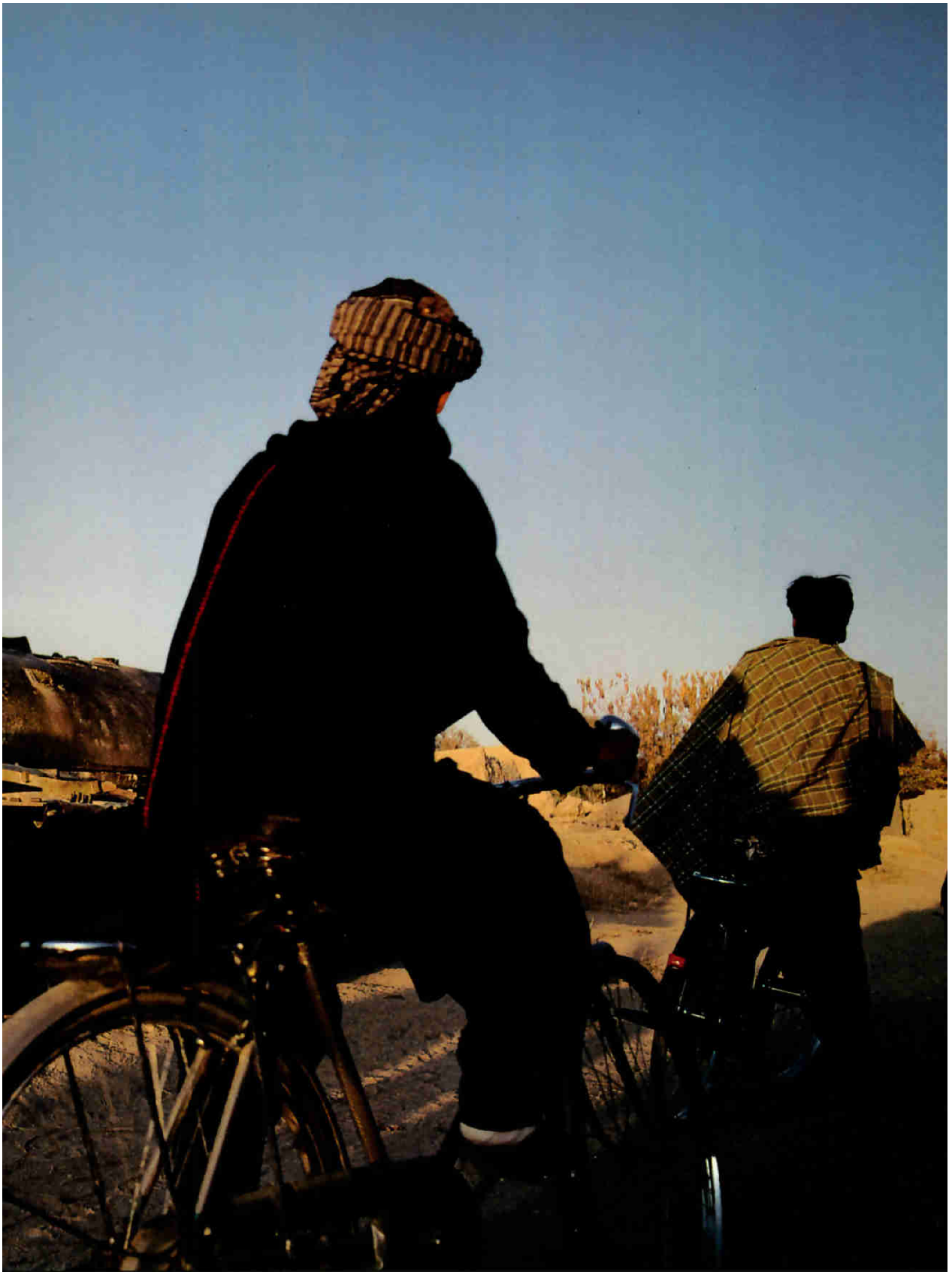
As he speaks of the future, the 32-year-old Afghan gets a distant look in his eyes. He is worried, he says. Can the new leaders restore law and order? Can they guarantee the safety of the capital? Can they rebuild the country?

He stoops to pick up an empty, rusting pil-sner beer can and tosses it onto a trash heap.





TANKS BECOME TOYS in Qandahar, site of intense fighting during the war.
*Most souvenirs are much more deadly: More than ten million mines, scattered
by Soviets and mujahidin alike, litter the landscape. UN mine clearers say they'll*



be working for years, perhaps decades, and may never finish the costly job. Besides maiming and killing, mines render useless much of the country's arable land, slowing the rebirth of agriculture.

THEIR FAITH INTACT *after years of bloodshed, nomads face west toward Mecca from the desert near Qandahar to offer the fourth of five daily Muslim prayers. Belief in God's mercy and compassion, a key component of Islam, will serve Afghans well as they return home from years of exile and fighting to begin the arduous task of rebuilding their stricken land.*

"I do know this," Muslim says. "Since the day we took Kabul, we have had mujahidin groups backed by Iran fighting groups backed by Pakistan fighting groups backed by Saudi Arabia and God Almighty knows who else. If the foreigners would just leave us alone, I promise you we would be a lot better off."

IN THE LAST DAYS of my visit, even Kabul begins to revive. At the shoemakers bazaar, dozens of merchants with dusty gray beards sit cross-legged tending to customers. Glorious burgundy carpets hang in the shopwindows of Chicken Street, which got its name from a poultry market that has long since moved. Blossoms and bouquets are still sold on Flower Street, but so are caviar and cornflakes and Pepsi-Cola from Dubayy.

Yet even now there is danger here. As my friend Ramazan and I stand on a city street one morning waiting to buy bread, a shot rings out and Ramazan falls into my arms. He has been shot in the leg.

Ramazan is lucky. The bullet does little damage. But we argue in the car as I drive him from the hospital to his small mud-brick cottage in an impoverished northwestern suburb.

"Why would anyone want to shoot you?" I ask, frustrated.

"Who knows. This is a lawless place."

"Then why do you stay here?"

"Where would I go? I have to protect my family. What would I do?"

"You should think about the future."

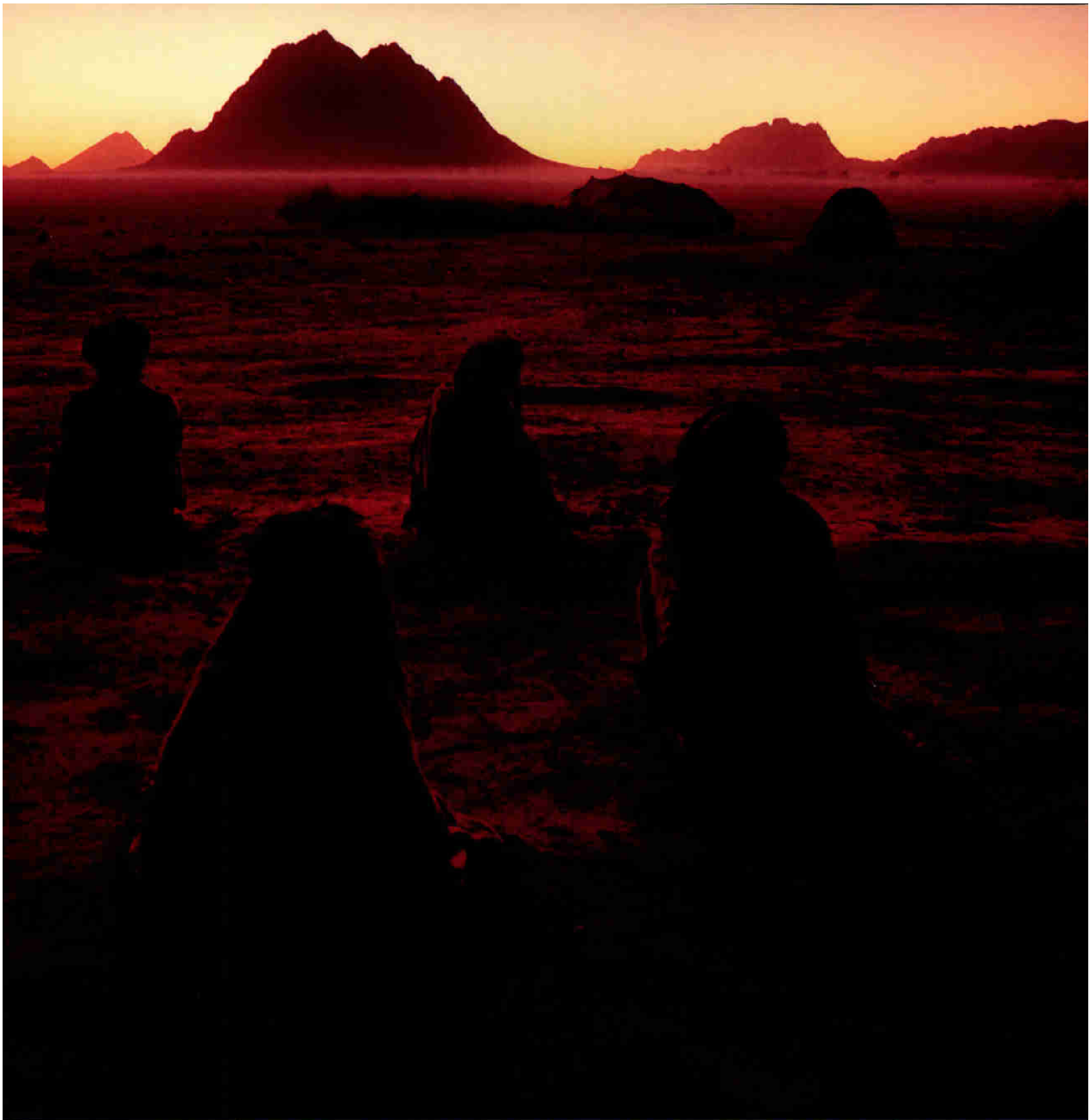
"I can't afford to. It's hard enough trying to stay alive today, never mind tomorrow."

The same could be said about Afghanistan. The days that follow are fraught with peril. The economy has been obliterated. The interim government in Kabul is paralyzed. Across the country, schools, hospitals, and mosques must be rebuilt.



The next year would bring terrible bloodshed to Kabul. As Defense Minister to President Burhanuddin Rabbani, Ahmad Shah Massoud would battle to hold the ancient capital, but his arch rival, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, would launch wave after wave of rocket and artillery attacks. More than 6,000 civilians would die. One fragile cease-fire after another would be broken. Sections of Kabul would be reduced to rubble.

I am wondering about Afghanistan's future as I stand in the hallway outside Massoud's office on the palace grounds. I am waiting for the former guerrilla leader to finish a meeting with the Russian ambassador before rejoining



Massoud to discuss how he hopes to forge law and order from the soup bowl of scorpions that is Kabul. Someone tugs at my sleeve.

"Would you like some tea?" asks an aged, bent little man. His white beard hangs over his tribal shirt.

"Yes, please," I say. He takes me by the hand and leads me down the hall to a closet-size room, where water is boiling in a big, blackened old pot. Cups, teapots, and sugar bowls are stacked high on the shelves.

"Did you come to Kabul with the mujahidin?" I ask.

"Oh no, I came long before then," he says. "I was making tea in this room before you

were born." He was the official tea server, he says, not only for the last king, Zahir Shah, but also for President Daoud, President Taraki, President Amin, President Karmal, President Najibullah, and now for Ahmad Shah Massoud.

"Then you must have seen many changes," I say. "What is the hope for this country?"

"Things will be difficult," he says. "When you look out into the streets, you can see the damage done by the war. But you cannot look into the souls of the people to see what has happened there. I've seen many people come and go. We are Afghans. We have always survived. We will survive again." □