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## **U.S. Military Secrets for Sale at Afghan Bazaar**

Paul Watson, Times Staff Writer

Bagram, Afghanistan

No more than 200 yards from the main gate of the sprawling U.S. base here, stolen computer drives containing classified military assessments of enemy targets, names of corrupt Afghan officials and descriptions of American defenses are on sale in the local bazaar.

Shop owners at the bazaar say Afghan cleaners, garbage collectors and other workers from the base arrive each day offering purloined goods, including knives, watches, refrigerators, packets of Viagra and flash memory drives taken from military laptops. The drives, smaller than a pack of chewing gum, are sold as used equipment.

The thefts of computer drives have the potential to expose military secrets as well as Social Security numbers and other identifying information of military personnel.

A reporter recently obtained several drives at the bazaar that contained documents marked "Secret." The contents included documents that were potentially embarrassing to Pakistan, a U.S. ally, presentations that named suspected militants targeted for "kill or capture" and discussions of U.S. efforts to "remove" or "marginalize" Afghan government officials whom the military considered "problem makers."

The drives also included deployment rosters and other documents that identified nearly 700 U.S. service members and their Social Security numbers, information that identity thieves could use to open credit card accounts in soldiers' names.

After choosing the name of an army captain at random, a reporter using the Internet was able to obtain detailed information on the woman, including her home address in Maryland and the license plate numbers of her 2003 Jeep Liberty sport utility vehicle and 1998 Harley Davidson XL883 Hugger motorcycle.

Troops serving overseas would be particularly vulnerable to attempts at identity theft because keeping track of their bank and credit records is difficult, said Jay Foley, co-executive director of the Identity Theft Resource Center in San Diego.

"It's absolutely absurd that this is happening in any way, shape or form," Foley said. "There's absolutely no reason for anyone in the military to have that kind of information on a flash drive and then have it out of their possession."

A flash drive also contained a classified briefing about the capabilities and limitations of a "man portable counter-mortar radar" used to find the source of guerrilla mortar rounds. A map pinpoints the U.S. camps and bases in Iraq where the sophisticated radar was deployed in March 2004.

Lt. Mike Cody, a spokesman for the U.S. forces here, declined to comment on the computer drives or their content.

"We do not discuss issues that involve or could affect operational security," he said.

Workers are supposed to be frisked as they leave the base, but they have various ways of deceiving guards, such as hiding computer drives behind photo IDs that they wear in holders around their necks, shop owners said. Others claim that U.S. soldiers illegally sell military property and help move it off the base, saying they need the money to pay bills back home.

Bagram base, the U.S. military's largest in Afghanistan and a hub for classified military activity, has suffered security lapses before, including an escape from a detention center where hundreds of Al Qaeda and Taliban suspects have been held and interrogated.

Last July, four Al Qaeda members, including the group's commander in Southeast Asia, Omar Faruq, escaped from Bagram by picking the lock on their cell. They then walked off the base, ditched their prison uniforms and fled through a muddy vineyard.

The men later boasted of their escape on a video and have not been captured. The military said it had tightened security at Bagram after the breakout.

One of the computer drives stolen from Bagram contained a series of slides prepared for a January 2005 briefing of American military officials that identified several Afghan governors and police chiefs as "problem makers" involved in kidnappings, the opium trade and attacks on allied troops with improvised bombs.

The chart showed the U.S. military's preferred methods of dealing with the men: "remove from office; if unable marginalize."

A chart dated Jan. 2, 2005, listed five Afghans as "Tier One Warlords." It identified Afghanistan's former defense minister Mohammed Qassim Fahim, current military chief of staff Abdul Rashid Dostum and counter-narcotics chief Gen. Mohammed Daoud as being involved in the narcotics trade. All three have denied committing crimes.

Another slide presentation identified 12 governors, police chiefs and lower-ranking officials that the U.S. military wanted removed from office. The men were involved in activities including drug trafficking, recruiting of Taliban fighters and active support for Taliban commanders, according to the presentation, which also named the military's preferred replacements.

The briefing said that efforts against Afghan officials were coordinated with U.S. special operations teams and must be approved by top commanders as well as military lawyers who apply unspecified criteria set by Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld.

The military also weighs any ties that any official has to President Hamid Karzai and members of his Cabinet or warlords, as well as the risk of destabilization when deciding which officials should be removed, the presentation said.

One of the men on the military's removal list, Sher Mohammed Akhundzada, was replaced in December as governor of Helmand province in southern Afghanistan. After removing him from the governor's office, Karzai appointed Akhundzada to Afghanistan's Senate. The U.S. military believed the governor, who was caught with almost 20,000 pounds of opium in his office last summer, to be a heroin trafficker.

The provincial police chief in Helmand, Abdul Rahman Jan, whom U.S. forces suspect of providing security for narcotics shipments, kept his job.

Though U.S. officials continue to praise Pakistan as a loyal ally in the war on terrorism, several documents on the flash drives show the military has struggled to break militant command and supply lines traced to Pakistan. Some of the documents also accused Pakistan's security forces of helping militants launch cross-border attacks on U.S. and allied forces.

Militant attacks on U.S. and allied forces have escalated sharply over the last half year, and once-rare suicide bombings are now frequent, especially in southern Afghan provinces close to infiltration routes from Pakistan.

A document dated Oct. 11, 2004, said at least two of the Taliban's top five leaders were believed to be in Pakistan. That country's government and military repeatedly have denied that leaders of militants fighting U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan operate from bases in Pakistan.

The Taliban leaders in Pakistan were identified as Mullah Akhtar Osmani, described as a "major Taliban facilitator for southern Afghanistan" and a "rear commander from Quetta" in southwest Pakistan, and Mullah Obaidullah, said to be "responsible for planning operations in Kandahar."

At the time, fugitive Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, his second-in-command Mullah Berader, and three other top Taliban commanders were all suspected of being in southern or central Afghanistan, according to the military briefing.

Another document said the Taliban and an allied militant group were working with Arab Al Qaeda members in Pakistan to plan and launch attacks in Afghanistan. A map presented at a "targeting meeting" for U.S. military commanders here on Jan. 27, 2005, identified the Pakistani cities of Peshawar and Quetta as planning and staging areas for terrorists heading to Afghanistan.

One of the terrorism groups is identified by the single name "Zawahiri," apparently a reference to Ayman Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's deputy and chief strategist in Al Qaeda. The document said his attacks had been launched from a region south of Miram Shah, administrative capital of Pakistan's unruly North Waziristan tribal region.

In January, a CIA missile strike targeted Zawahiri in a village more than 100 miles to the northeast, but he was not among the 18 killed, who included women and children.

Other documents on the computer drives listed senior Taliban commanders and "facilitators" living in Pakistan. The Pakistani government strenuously denies allegations by the Afghan government that it is harboring Taliban and other guerrilla fighters.

An August 2004 computer slide presentation marked "Secret" outlined "obstacles to success" along the border and accused Pakistan of making "false and inaccurate reports of border incidents." It also complained of political and military inertia in Pakistan.

Half a year later, other documents indicated that little progress had been made. A classified document from early 2005 listing "Target Objectives" said U.S. forces must "interdict the supply of IEDs (improvised explosive devices) from Pakistan" and "interdict infiltration routes from Pakistan."

A special operations task force map highlighting militants' infiltration routes from Pakistan in early 2005 included this comment from a U.S. military commander: "Pakistani border forces [should] cease assisting cross border insurgent activities."

Special correspondent Wesal Zaman in Kabul contributed to this report.

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**1,373 miles into the heart of Afghanistan;  
The Ring Road is meant to link the nation and connect its major cities. But traveling the route  
is no Sunday drive.**

Paul Watson, Times Staff Writer

Shahr-i-Safa, Afghanistan

AS a hair-thin line on a map, Afghanistan's national Ring Road looks easy enough to conquer.

But tell war-hardened Afghans that you're going to travel its entire 1,373-mile length unarmed, facing winter and a raging insurgency, and they look at you like you're completely mad.

Five years after the fall of the Taliban, it shouldn't be such a challenge.

Rebuilding the two-lane highway that connects Afghanistan's major cities has been a centerpiece of the U.S.-led effort to transform the nation. It is so important that Afghanistan's president, Hamid Karzai, said that President Bush once demanded daily updates on the roadwork from Kabul south to Kandahar, the seat of power under Taliban rule.

U.S. grants have paid for rebuilding a third of the road, according to Afghan government figures. Japan, Saudi Arabia and Iran are responsible for repairing other sections, a rare case in which Washington and Tehran are working toward the same goal. Officially, the \$1.05-billion project is almost finished.

But as with many things in Afghanistan, there is a chasm between the rhetoric and reality.

Some of the best stretches of the road are among the Taliban's favorite killing grounds. This fall, Canadian troops led the biggest ground battle in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's 57-year history, in part to regain control of a stretch of highway west of Kandahar. The NATO offensive cleared the insurgents, but guerrillas and highway robbers still prey on travelers in many other places.

About 40% of the road isn't finished. Some sections are nothing more than muddy tracks through the country's lawless Wild West, where you can drive for hours without seeing another vehicle fishtailing and backsliding through the muck along with you.

The only way to understand the condition of the road and grasp what it says about Afghanistan is to drive it.

The trip took my interpreter, driver and me seven days, inching along slippery edges of steep cliffs, wandering in the wilderness without road signs, suffering two flat tires, a ruptured radiator and a spinout on mountain ice.

On the way, we managed to avoid a Taliban ambush, a potential kidnapper or highway robber, a suicide bomber and a gunman who fired close enough to take off one of our heads.

Getting ready

I KNEW some of the Ring Road all too well. I traveled it for weeks in the early Taliban era a decade ago, when years of war and neglect already had reduced the highway to patches of broken asphalt connected by dirt, rocks and ruts. A trip that would take a few hours on a proper road was days of torture, the speedometer straining to break 10 mph as the vehicle crawled over shell craters and pond-sized potholes.

This time, I would be leaving from Kabul with interpreter Wesal Zaman and driver Zyarat Gul. A quiet and calm man, Gul had gotten us home safely from other terrible places.

Before starting out, we visited three experts at the Economics Ministry to find out what we were in for.

Sayed Arif Nazif, the ministry's director of design, told us that the building of the road began in the mid-1970s. The United States helped, but most of the money came from the Soviet Union and Arab countries.

Farmers used the road to get their produce to market. Afghanistan became the world's largest exporter of dried grapes, apples and other fruit. It also sent an assortment of nuts.

"In those days, in terms of our roads, we were much more advanced than neighboring countries," Nazif said. "But because of the wars and other problems, all our roads were destroyed."

Soviet troops and tanks poured down the Ring Road to invade Afghanistan in the dead of night on Dec. 25, 1979, setting off a decades-long tailspin from which Afghans are still trying to recover.

The rebuilding of the road is supposed to help revive the economy and break down ethnic differences by allowing Afghans to travel more freely. Although dried fruit exports are 20% of what they were before the wars, reconstruction is showing benefits, Nazif said. This year, the repaved road allowed farmers to get fresh pomegranates, grapes and apples to Kabul's airport, and the first few flights delivered the produce to wealthy Persian Gulf states.

I had a more pressing question: "How long do you think it would take to drive the whole Ring Road?"

Nazif shifted in his seat. "Take the length of 1,373 miles, and divide by an average speed of 50 miles an hour," he said.

"That sounds like we could do it in maybe four days," I replied, trying to do some quick mental math. Nazif smiled and nodded, but we both knew Afghanistan was a lot more complicated than that.

Before we started, we took some precautions that are prudent for any trip into the countryside: We loaded the car with two spare tires, a shovel, bottled water and snacks. And we made one rule: If Gul, an ethnic Pashtun like most of the Taliban, saw anything on the horizon or felt anything he didn't like, he should turn around without pausing to ask us.

A small victory

AS the Ring Road begins a steady climb out of Kabul on a 27-mile section rebuilt by the Taliban, the horizon is bright white with towering snow-covered mountains. The road is as smooth as any in the United States. But the government can't afford to keep it plowed, so it was covered with packed snow and ice that brought long lines of heavy transports to a halt on the highlands near Ghazni.

We were less than six hours into the journey near Shahr-i-Safa when we saw the first signs of Taliban activity.

Four insurgents armed with AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenades had ridden two motorcycles to a hill overlooking a stretch of the highway near Qalat. About 3 p.m., they opened fire on a civilian truck taking supplies to an Afghan military base, a common guerrilla tactic.

Normally, insurgents carry out swift attacks and make a getaway into the desert. But this time a pickup carrying half a dozen Afghan national army troops happened by. They pinned the guerrillas down from behind and called in a second unit to attack from the front.

We reached the scene about half an hour after the battle ended. Jubilant Afghan troops were smiling and joking next to three Taliban corpses, like scavengers enjoying quality roadkill. One of the dead men lay on his back with his knees bent, as if he might jump up at any moment. But the bullet hole in his neck left no doubt his war was over.

The fourth fighter escaped, so the victory wasn't complete, said Afghan army Maj. Atullah Maiwandwal.

It was a battle too small to make the news, let alone change the course of a war. But the major and his men had achieved something significant: Without U.S. military advisors or foreign backup, they defended a piece of highway rebuilt with a \$237-million U.S. grant, the sort of gradual progress that often gets lost amid the noise of suicide bombings and other insurgent attacks.

"Where are your bodyguards?" one soldier asked, stunned that we were traveling the highway without weapons.

We explained that we preferred to travel unencumbered by armed escorts. So as night fell, we rushed off to Kandahar, which has been staggering under a wave of suicide bombings. The governor gave us beds in his guest house.

Early the next morning, we headed west into Helmand province, the scene of fierce fighting this year between NATO forces and the Taliban.

A large billboard on the edge of Kandahar declared that the highway was being rebuilt as a gift of the Japanese people.

Actually, the 70 miles of road that Japan pledged \$76 million to fix is the same bumpy, cracked surface that it has been for years. The area is too dangerous for road crews.

It is the hashish harvest season, and marijuana plants as big as Christmas trees are stacked by the thousands against mud-brick homes, curing in the sun. Villagers scrape the gooey resin, which is pressed into blocks and exported along the same routes that move the opium used to produce heroin, a big source of the insurgents' income.

Hundreds of gunmen prowl the Ring Road in Helmand. They are members of private militias who take orders from local warlords and drug barons and operate illegal checkpoints, mostly to squeeze money from truck drivers.

As one longtime resident of Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital, told us, "They are loyal to the government until 4 o'clock in the afternoon, and then until the next morning they're enemies."

As we neared the Lashkar Gah turnoff, in an area where we were told that kidnappers had abducted two German journalists, our driver broke our one rule.

The broken rule

GUL slowed for a speed bump, and instead of accelerating when a militiaman jumped up with an AK-47, he stopped. Gul opened the driver's window, apparently weighing the comparative risks of getting shot and getting kidnapped. The gunman stuck his head in, saw me in the back seat and smiled like a dog sniffing fresh meat.

"Get us out of here!" I shouted at Gul, and he hesitated. "Get moving!"

Gul hit the gas. The barrel of the gunman's rifle clunked off the rear side of the car. Not daring to look back, I tensed for the shot that didn't come.

In Lashkar Gah, we stopped at a construction agency funded by the United States Agency for International Development, or USAID, where we previously had met cook Khudai Nazar. At 64, he is old enough to remember what is possible with peace, and young enough to believe he might live to see it again.

We asked what he remembered of the Ring Road of his childhood. He sent his son for an opaque plastic sandwich bag stuffed with browning reference letters and old photographs.

They tell of a more innocent age, from the late 1940s to the 1970s, when American workers and their families lived in Helmand. They were building a dam, a power plant, irrigation canals and other development projects in the Afghan desert.

In one black-and-white photograph, Nazar is 12 years old and standing on a lush lawn surrounded by a white picket fence with his new bicycle, a gift from Rose and Don Wonderly of Portland, Ore.

"The first time I met with her, I didn't understand English," recalled Nazar, who speaks with an American accent. "American people always like children, and they didn't have any. She said come every day to my house and I'm gonna teach you English."

Within a few days, Rose was giving the boy new clothes and encouraging other American families to leave him some of their hand-me-downs. The Wonderlys left in 1960.

By the time the Soviets invaded in 1979, Nazar had worked for a string of other Americans: George Belissary promoted the servant to a warehouse job; JoAnn and Ronald Thompson of Sacramento praised his bread-baking skills; Jack and Maxine Smith wrote of their fondness for his pastries and good humor.

The Smiths had to flee the Soviet occupation after 17 months in Afghanistan, and in her last words to him, Nazar said, Maxine urged him to take his wife and their 10 children to Pakistan.

"She said, 'Just send me a message and I'll have a house waiting for you -- everything,' " Nazar said wistfully. It was clear in his breaking voice that he wished he could have left. But he never found enough money, or will, to turn his back on the land of his birth.

Nazar bid us farewell with the hope that some of his long-lost American friends might try to reach him, maybe even risk a visit.

Three hours after we left Lashkar Gah, a suicide bomber walked into the well-guarded compound of the provincial governor, a few blocks from where we'd visited Nazar, and blew himself up in the parking lot, killing eight people.

### The Wild West

HEADING north toward Herat, we drove for several hours past mountains weathered so smooth they seemed molded from clay. We reached Herat that night, putting us more than halfway along the Ring Road at the end of our second day.

Swift progress made us overconfident. We talked about being back in Kabul in a day or so. We marveled at the traffic lights operating at all the main intersections in Herat, the only major city to escape the destruction of Afghanistan's wars.

The pleasure was short-lived. The next morning, 35 miles northeast of Herat, the highway abruptly ended. We didn't see asphalt again for three days.

Iran was supposed to complete 70 miles of paved road from Herat into Badghis province, but its contractors suddenly stopped work, said Gov. Mohammed Naseem Tokhi. Some say the money ran out; others cite unspecified problems between Iran and the rest of the international community, Tokhi said. He has received no official explanation.

The Afghan national government hasn't even been able to find a country willing to fund construction of the road through the rest of the province.

Entering Badghis was like driving back into biblical times. Ours was the only internal-combustion engine running for miles. Most people were walking or riding donkeys. The gray smoke of cooking fires seeped through the black fabric of nomads' low-slung tents.

The province's people, many of whom are Pashtuns, have long felt cut off from the rest of the country. Now they are largely missing out on billions of dollars in international aid, and that makes Badghis an ideal recruiting ground for insurgents. Grinding poverty and poor health have left even moderates angry with Karzai's government and its foreign backers.

Prolonged drought followed by devastating floods last month left three-quarters of the province's people without enough food, Tokhi said. The only roads into the province are so bad that relief agencies are having a tough time reaching people. Many could die during the winter, he said.

In the frontier town of Bala Murghab, a Ring Road bridge is a dangerously unstable span covered with metal sheets laid by people who salvaged them from a derelict factory. The 200,000 residents of the surrounding area have no electricity, and their water is so bad that diarrhea is a main killer.

Smoldering rage exploded this fall when gunmen stormed the district commissioner's new headquarters, a three-story yellow brick building built by USAID. They blasted a rocket-propelled grenade through the guardhouse and fired assault rifles at offices and police cars, shattering most of the main building's windows. The district commissioner fled for his life. Three foreign workers at a U.S.-based agency's compound escaped by hiding in their garden as rampaging mobs looted the buildings.

When the aid agency shut its office, townspeople persuaded its Afghan supervisor, Ghalam Seddiq, to become mayor. Slipping another prayer bead along a string as he talked to us, Seddiq said the

attackers wanted to stop the aid agency's education programs and prevent children from learning, a Taliban priority.

The center of town is a ramshackle bazaar, where merchants glared as we drove along muddy streets. A large padlock sealed the front doors of the only hotel. The elderly caretaker said it was too dangerous to stay there, but the new district commissioner ordered the hotel to open for us.

In this Afghan version of a Wild West town, Abdul Jalil Sekandari is the deputy sheriff.

Guarded by a young man with an AK-47 slung over his shoulder, Sekandari dropped by our hotel room that night. By the glow of an oil lamp, he griped about the government and foreign aid, personally guaranteed our safety and invited us to spend the night with him in the police station. We thought our odds were better in the hotel.

Good riddance

WE rode out of town at first light. We weren't far into the countryside when a man in a Taliban-style black turban lurking near a disabled Soviet tank leveled his Kalashnikov rifle and took a potshot at us. We heard the loud hiss-snap of a bullet passing close by, but he didn't fire again. It must have been a good-riddance round.

Soon even the dirt road disappeared into a labyrinth of mud tracks that crisscrossed broad valleys. We fishtailed and churned our way through dense fog, along tire ruts at least 2 feet deep. The four-wheel-drive car jerked and bucked like a rodeo bull.

There were no road signs, and no other vehicles. So the only thing to do was ask directions from a shepherd or a farmer working the sodden earth with a wooden plow pulled by his donkey.

"Does this road go to Maimana?" we asked an old man at one crossroads.

"Yes. But others prefer that way," he replied, nodding toward a dirt road heading in the opposite direction.

When we pulled in for a rest in Maimana, a pool of green fluid spilled out of a hole in the radiator, which a mechanic pounded shut the next morning.

We finally returned to paved highway at Andkhai, a dust-blown place near the border with Turkmenistan, where for centuries tribal weavers have produced some of Afghanistan's best carpets.

Mohammed Ikram, a dealer representing more than 400 female weavers, was at the roadside, squatting in the dirt to measure a carpet in a floral design of red, blue and yellow. It would go to Pakistan, where a trader would pay about \$210 a yard, attach a "Made in Pakistan" label and export it to the United States or Europe for hundreds of dollars in profit, Ikram said.

If Afghanistan could have peace and security, traders would follow the Ring Road straight to Andkhai, he imagined. "And if tourists come here, then we will all be rich," Ikram said, smiling.

Paved highway awaited us on the other side of town, so we pressed on south to Mazar-i-Sharif, chattering about how good it would feel to have hot water and lights.

Come back later

MAZAR-I-SHARIF means Tomb of the Exalted. It is home to one of the holiest sites in Islam. Some Shiites believe it is the final burial place of Hazrat Ali, the prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, who was assassinated and first buried near Baghdad in the 7th century. Blood is still being spilled over the schism that followed, but not in Afghanistan.

Robbers are the biggest threat on the roads around Mazar. Andkhai's carpet traders say they are regularly fleeced by gunmen demanding illegal road taxes.

After a night of comfort in Mazar, it was an easy drive to the Salang Tunnel, a 1.7-mile passage at 11,034 feet built by the Soviets through the Hindu Kush mountains on the route south to Kabul.

In winter, howling blizzards pummel the Salang's peaks. Avalanches, asphyxiation and plunges off cliffs have killed dozens of travelers.

As we headed up the pass, we recalled another trip a few weeks earlier when Gul skidded on black ice in the tunnel. The wheels hit the edge of a concrete walkway so hard that the front axle broke. He was elected to walk through a blizzard to a public works outpost a mile down the mountain. It was the middle of the night and deathly cold. A few workers huddled around a small wood stove.

"Is anyone hurt?" one asked when Gul asked for help.

"No."

"Are there any women?"

"No."

"Are you stuck in the middle of the road?"

"No."

"Then go back to your car and come back in the morning."

This time, we made it through the tunnel and most of the Salang Pass without problems. The sky was ice blue, the road mostly clear. It seemed too easy for the end to such a hard journey.

Just then, Gul put the car into a 360-degree spin. A snow bank kept us from going over the edge.

We sat silently for a few seconds, staring up at the meandering Ring Road to see whether that was the worst that would happen -- or whether fate was about to catch up with us in the form of a sliding truck.

Our luck held. There wasn't anyone close enough to harm us.

The car, with every bolt, spring and cable caked in mud, creaked and shimmied its way down the Shomali plains, and in a few hours we were overlooking Kabul, sprawled out across a plateau and shrouded in brown smog. The capital hadn't had a suicide bombing for days. The only thing left to worry about was traffic.

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**DEMOCRACY IN THE BALANCE;  
Danger lurks for Afghans who dare to go to school;  
Gritty, devoted educators persevere in the face of Taliban violence.**

Paul Watson, Times Staff Writer

Zarghon, Afghanistan

THE teacher had been warned.

Mohammed Aref was on duty near the front gate of his school. The children were at recess, playing volleyball without a net.

The throaty rumble of a motorcycle broke through their playful shrieks and laughter. The lone rider, a man wearing a traditional *shalwar kameez* with his face obscured by the long tail of his turban, called Aref over to talk. Then he pulled an AK-47 from under his baggy shirt and fired six bullets into the teacher.

Aref had no way to defend himself. His only weapons were his faith in knowledge, some tattered books and a piece of chalk. He died in the dirt in front of horrified pupils.

Fifteen days earlier, Taliban guerrillas had come in the darkness and posted a "night letter" on the door of his farmhouse, telling the 50-year-old teacher to stay away from the school if he wanted to stay alive.

Aref, who earned just \$50 a month, stood his ground. One of the first victims in the resurgent Taliban's dirty war on education, he gave his life trying to teach Afghan children that there is more to theirs than endless war.

After the U.S. joined with anti-Taliban militias five years ago to bring down the Islamist government, one of the biggest changes was in education. The Taliban, whose name means "students," regard Western-style education as a direct threat to the vision of a pure Islamic state. Its followers regard modern education as a morally toxic force of Western colonialism.

The Taliban's founders learned their disdain for most things modern in radical religious schools in Pakistan, where the only legitimate subject is study of the Koran. Extremist mullahs teach a harsh version of Islam that professes to be a return to traditions established by the prophet Muhammad.

A decade ago, when the Taliban swept across southern Afghanistan to seize the capital, Kabul, the mullahs issued edicts closing the women's university and most girls' schools. A collapsing infrastructure made it difficult for many boys to attend school as well.

When schools reopened in 2002 after the ouster of the Taliban regime, only about a third of Afghanistan's school-age children were in class. Today, the World Bank says, the figure is 87%, about 6.5 million pupils, a reflection of the hope of Afghan parents that the U.S.-backed government

will be able to bring their country into the modern world. Some aid workers estimate the figure is much lower.

The United States has distributed textbooks and supplies, trained 50,000 teachers and rebuilt 672 schools.

But once again, education is under pressure from the Taliban. The militants are active once more across at least half of the country, including the southern province of Helmand, where Aref died in December 2005. Afghanistan's corrupt police and weak army are unable to provide much security.

Over the last year, insurgents have burned at least 146 schools, and insecurity has forced 215 others to close, the Afghan Education Ministry says. Zuhoor Afghan, an advisor to Education Minister Mohammed Hanif Atmar, says about 220,000 students have quit school because they fear for their lives.

To his wife and their seven children, and the many villagers who respected him, Aref was a mujahid, a courageous man engaged in a holy struggle to defeat ignorance and hatred so Afghanistan might know peace.

"He loved teaching," said his brother, Mohammed Rafiq Mohammedi. "It was important to him because he wanted students to learn what he knew and build the nation, to work for the people."

#### Continuing threats

The day after Aref died, none of his school's 1,300 students or their teachers showed up for class.

Their principal, Noor Mohammed, spent weeks trying to undo the damage, sitting with parents for hours, trying to convince them they had to keep the school open.

"They said, 'Unless you guarantee the security of our children, we will not allow them to go to school,' " he recalled outside the deserted school recently. "I said, 'I cannot guarantee the lives of your children, but they must study as much as they can.' "

As he desperately tried to reassure parents and children, Mohammed received his own night letter, which was posted on the gate of the local mosque for all to see.

"Drop this business of teaching and the school or you will be responsible for your own death," it warned. "If you continue, you will have to wash your hands of your life."

Like Aref, the principal kept going, but he couldn't vanquish the terror sown by the Taliban or protect his school.

Even where Taliban violence isn't threatening schools, Afghanistan's other problems are. Across the country, schools are in crisis because of corrupt contractors, shoddy building practices and a chronic shortage of textbooks and trained teachers, said Afghan, the Education Ministry official.

"If they have teachers, they don't have books," he said. "If they have books, they have no chairs. If they have fancy buildings, they have no toilets."

The government doesn't even know how many teachers there are because it is still awaiting the results of a head count started early this year. Despite the progress in many areas, every district in the country is reporting a shortage of qualified teachers, Afghan said.

"We need thousands of professional teachers, and we also need to train most of our professional teachers who are teaching now," he said. "There are students who have not even finished their schooling yet, but they are teaching. For example, students in grade 10 and 11 are teaching grade 3 or 4, and in some places it's even worse than that."

The situation is likely to improve under Atmar, the education minister, who has a strategic plan to improve the system, said Wagma Battoo Hassan Zumati, education program coordinator for CARE, a U.S.-based aid agency. Atmar won praise from foreign aid donors for his management of the rural reconstruction and development ministry.

But many Afghans are losing patience. Encouraged by the promises of Western leaders, they believed the Taliban's defeat meant the dawn of a new age of rapid progress, in which all children could get a good education. The plodding advances, even relapses to the more familiar rot of war and corruption in large parts of the country, feed a growing cynicism toward foreign governments and aid agencies.

"The optimism has died because these people are not honest with each other or with us," Afghan said. "They are working for their own benefit."

Woman of defiance

FATIMA MUSHTAQ put her life on the line long ago to help educate Afghanistan.

When the Taliban's mullahs ruled, she ran a secret school for women. Now, as head of education for Ghazni province in central Afghanistan, she is defying the extremists' efforts to turn back the clock. And, as a woman in a deeply conservative region, she also fights entrenched sexism and sclerotic bureaucracy.

Mushtaq does not hide her elegant face in public. She dares to adorn it with makeup. She covers her hair with a sheer white scarf, embroidered with delicate flowers, draped over her shoulders. Her voice is soft, but uncompromising.

And she packs a pistol.

"I can use it," she said with a steely smile.

She may have to. Last fall, Mushtaq received a night letter warning that she would be killed if she didn't quit her job and stay home.

"I said, 'Go ahead. Everything that you can do, I'm ready for it.' "

Friends and colleagues have tried to persuade her to give in to the threats. But Mushtaq feels the burden of a nation on her shoulders. She's afraid that if she surrenders, other women will give up too, and then everything they've gained will be lost.

And she has so much left to fight for.

"When we go to people and tell them, 'You should send your daughters to school,' they tell us, 'First you build a school, then we will send you our daughters,' " she said.

Over the last year, insurgents have killed a principal and one of his office staffers and burned more than a dozen of Ghazni's schools. Taliban threats have shut down at least 13 more, forcing their students to study in homes and mosques.

About half the province's schools have no buildings or tents, and 100,000 Ghazni students attend class in the open, many of them sitting in the broiling desert, Mushtaq said. Textbooks are in short supply everywhere.

But she insists on seeing the bright side.

"It's a bad situation with a good future," she said.

It takes a lot of optimism to see good things ahead for Ghazni villages such as Chaghatsu, in a patch of windblown desert almost 100 miles southwest of Kabul. It is surrounded by barren, black mountains, a forbidding sanctuary for Taliban insurgents and their allies.

The villagers are ethnic Hazaras, who by one theory are descendants of Genghis Khan's Mongol army that invaded central Afghanistan in the 12th century. They have suffered persecution for generations, but after the Taliban's fall, they enjoyed a brief period of peace.

That changed a year ago when the insurgents suddenly grew stronger here. About 4 a.m. on May 29, marauders came down from the mountains and attacked Chaghatsu's small school, just down the road from an Afghan army checkpoint.

A bomb placed in a storage room failed to explode, but ignited a fire that destroyed most of the books and part of the school. Villagers doused the flames with shovels of dirt and buckets of water, Principal Gul Mohammed said.

"There are a lot of motorcycles and cars passing us, and they are mostly Taliban or their informers," he said, with a worried eye to the dirt track that passes in front of his office window.

Twelve days before the attempted bombing, two men on a motorcycle passed by close to the gate about 5 p.m. One got off to warn the watchman that "girls should not go to school."

Some were moved the next day to a mosque. Several older girls remained in their regular classroom, where on a recent morning they still were studying. Sitting on floor mats, they were learning English.

"They are afraid of suicide attackers," the principal said. "They are afraid that someone might come into their class and explode or throw a grenade."

About 20 first-grade boys filled the scorched remains of the storage room, studying arithmetic under a burned-out ceiling, sitting on the floor in front of a blackboard propped against a charred wall. Other boys had their lessons in the hallway or outside on the hard dirt in the shade of a rear wall.

"Even though the school was burned, our students and teachers are more enthusiastic and they are still coming," said Mohammed Hassan, 25, the girls' cheery English teacher. "We won't be afraid of a single incident. A small warning cannot prevent us from teaching."

Mushtaq runs a department staffed by men, many of whom don't like working under a woman.

On a recent morning, one of her male staff members leaned over her large wooden desk and tried to browbeat her into returning a clerk she had shifted temporarily to another department. An elderly

man in a turban demanded tents for his students. Several others reported new threats from the Taliban to kill teachers or burn schools and wanted to know what Mushtaq was going to do to protect them.

"It's the people's duty to protect their schools," she answered repeatedly, urging them to volunteer to guard the schools against Taliban attacks. "People have tried to persuade me to quit. I tell them, 'I'm a lady, but I'm strong and I'm brave.' "

Mushtaq had spent the morning fielding school security alerts on her cellphone, or from officials who traveled from remote villages.

Syed Dilawar, a 60-year-old clerk, joined the scrum of men pressing in around her desk. He had come more than 40 miles from a village in the desert of Qarah Bagh, to plead for protection from insurgents who were threatening to destroy his school.

He had traveled in a car with a woman and two other elderly men. Four Taliban guerrillas stopped them, and when they searched the car, they spotted the belt of Dilawar's satchel poking out from under the seat where he had tried to hide it. They found reports addressed to Mushtaq inside.

Dilawar acknowledged that the bag was his, and as the Taliban led him toward a nearby mountain, the female passenger, a stranger to him, fell at their feet, begging them not to kill him. The two male passengers added their appeals for mercy.

"I told them that I am the servant of the children of this country, and I am the servant of Afghan Muslims and I am the servant of Islam. I am the clerk that brings the salaries to the poor teachers of Ghazni," Dilawar said.

"Then they replied, 'You are not serving Islam, you are serving America, you are serving the infidels. You are misleading our children and you want them to become infidels too.' "

But the woman continued to cry, and on a forsaken stretch that some of the world's most powerful armies could not make safe, her tears were enough to spare Dilawar's life.

"She was the one who saved me," he said.

## Challenges ahead

ONE of the children who saw Aref die was Saifullah, a 13-year-old third-grader with a gold pillbox Kandahari cap covered with tiny round mirrors that glint in the midday sun. Aref was his Pashto-language teacher.

Standing in the dirt yard where the educator was killed, the boy stretched his right arm behind his back, nervously clutching the crook of his left, and paid his slain teacher a simple tribute. "I liked him because he did not beat us," he said, adding almost as an afterthought: "And he was teaching very well."

Saifullah wants to be a doctor. His friend, Samidullah, 12, hopes to become an engineer. But the futures of millions of children, and of Afghanistan itself, in some measure depend on whether their schools continue to function.

Without education, the two boys here are more likely to be sucked back down into Helmand's swamp of war and drug trafficking.

Aref's own son, 10-year-old Mohammed Asif, goes to a nearby school that was recently renovated by an Afghan subcontractor working for the U.S. military. But within weeks, the paint was peeling again, the windowpanes were broken, and the concrete was cracking. The rebuilt road outside was also crumbling.

Afghans accuse the Americans of failing to keep their promise to fix the schools. "And then people think of them as real infidels," said the principal, Mohammed Rahim. The U.S. military said it was assigning engineers to repair teams to make sure it didn't happen again.

But engineering can't protect a school from a determined arsonist or bomber.

A few months after killing Aref, the Taliban guerrillas returned and set his school on fire. The flames destroyed the roof, melted window screens and blackened the mud-and-wattle walls.

In a hallway, an attacker used a piece of charcoal to write a lesson in bold Pashto.

"This is the country of betrayers," it said. "What good will it do you? We will discuss this in the next life and on doomsday."

Nearby, someone scrawled an apparent reply in smaller script: "Do you have hope for the country?"

And, as if to remove any doubt about his defiance, the writer added: "My country."