

Afghan women: knowledge and

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANTOINETTE DE JONG, TEXT BY CHEKEBA HACHEMI

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The only university open to Afghan women is located in Faizabad in northern Afghanistan, an area not under Taliban control. Antoinette de Jong photographed students there in April 2001. In this first-hand account, NGO director Chekeba Hachemi speaks of the suffering of her people, but also of their spirit of resistance. She appeals to the world community not to let Afghanistan become "an inconsolable country."



The majority of these students fled Kabul after Taliban forces captured the city and banned education for women. "In the Koran, it is stated that every Muslim has to acquire as much knowledge as possible. Men and women alike," says one student.

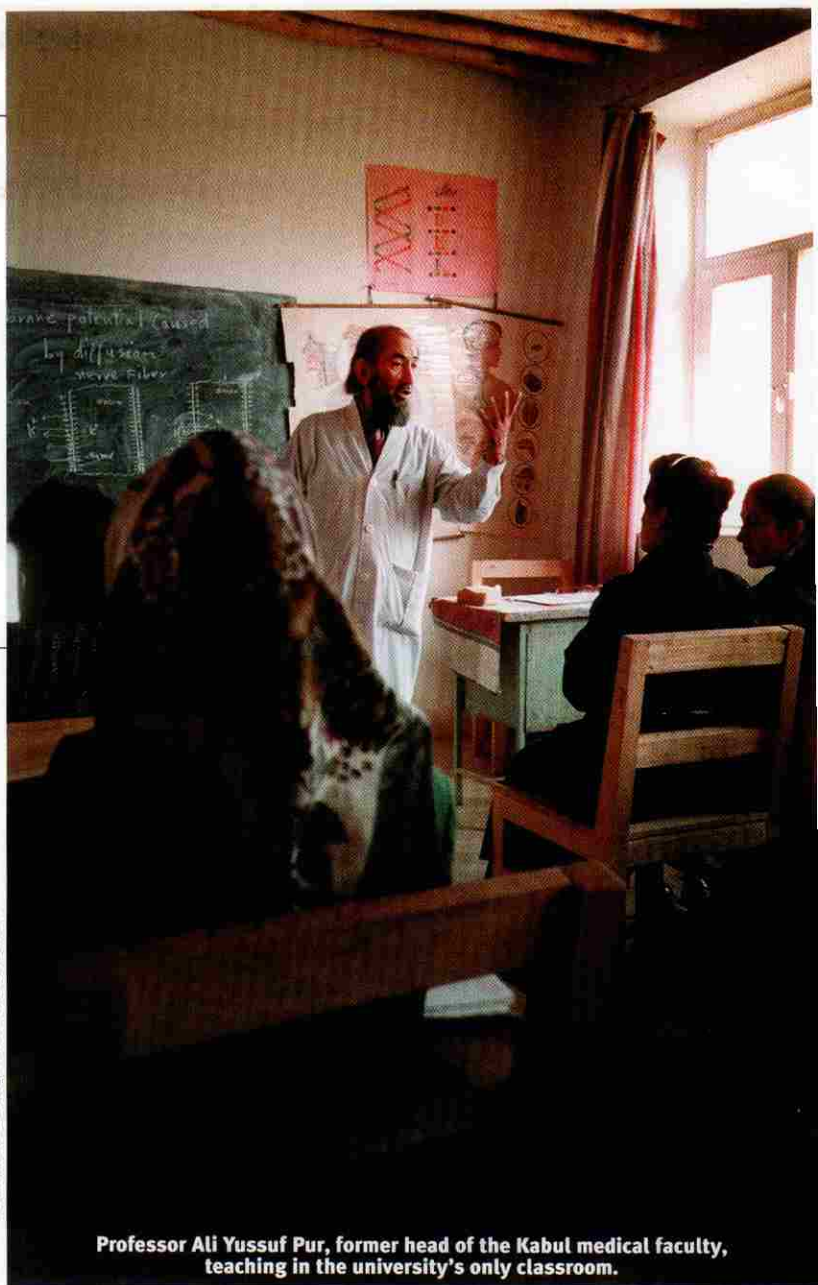
revolt

It took the international community a long time, a very long time, to grasp what a tremendous danger the Taliban regime in Afghanistan posed. Dangerous for Afghans—their freedoms, their hopes for peace and their ancient culture—and for all the world's peoples. The hallucinating pictures of the September 11 events ended up convincing us that Evil was at work in Kabul. Yet, we had been warned. A few months earlier, other pictures had sparked indignation around the world: women trapped in fabric dungeons, peering at us from behind narrow bars: Afghans in *chadris*. And from behind those bars, inside those moving, ghostly dungeons, frail, angry voices spoke to us. For Afghan women are like Afghan men: courageous. Bravery is an ancestral virtue in Afghanistan. They spoke to journalists about the hell in which they were imprisoned, their dark solitude and the dark future of their people, their children and their betrothed.

They resisted. True to their reputation of pride and dignity, women living in areas under Taliban control set up underground schools, held secret press conferences and organized mutual assistance networks to defend themselves against ignorance, hunger and terror. Women who had managed to take refuge in free areas begged Western journalists to tell the whole world that Kabul had turned into a prison that would some day become a cemetery.

Why didn't we pay more attention to these women? We believed they were the latest in an endless string of misogyny's victims, one that has plagued so many places for so long. In a way, we trivialized their agony by likening it to comparable pain that others have suffered. That was a huge mistake, for the Taliban regime resembles nothing that we have ever seen, and the women of Afghanistan have been at the heart of an incomparable tragedy. Aware, concerned, empathetic women on the five continents listened, mobilized and demanded that their governments do something. But their appeals fell on deaf ears.

Yes, the officials said, Afghan women are suffering, but it's not our fault and besides, what can we do about it? Yet everything was still possible at the time. Governments could have put pressure on the Taliban and heeded General Massoud, who so feared the day when they would carry the fires of war to our own countries. That day is here. We have reacted too late, when



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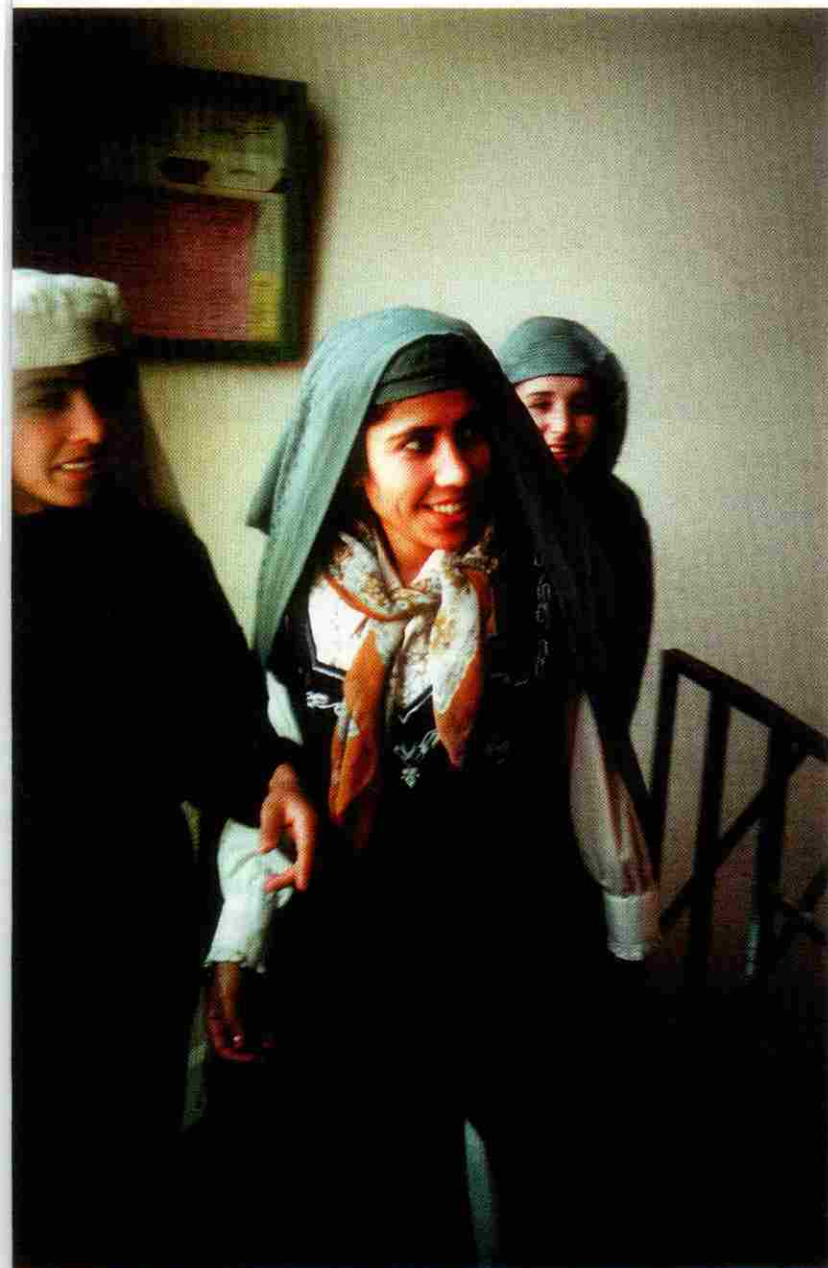
Professor Ali Yussuf Pur, former head of the Kabul medical faculty, teaching in the university's only classroom.

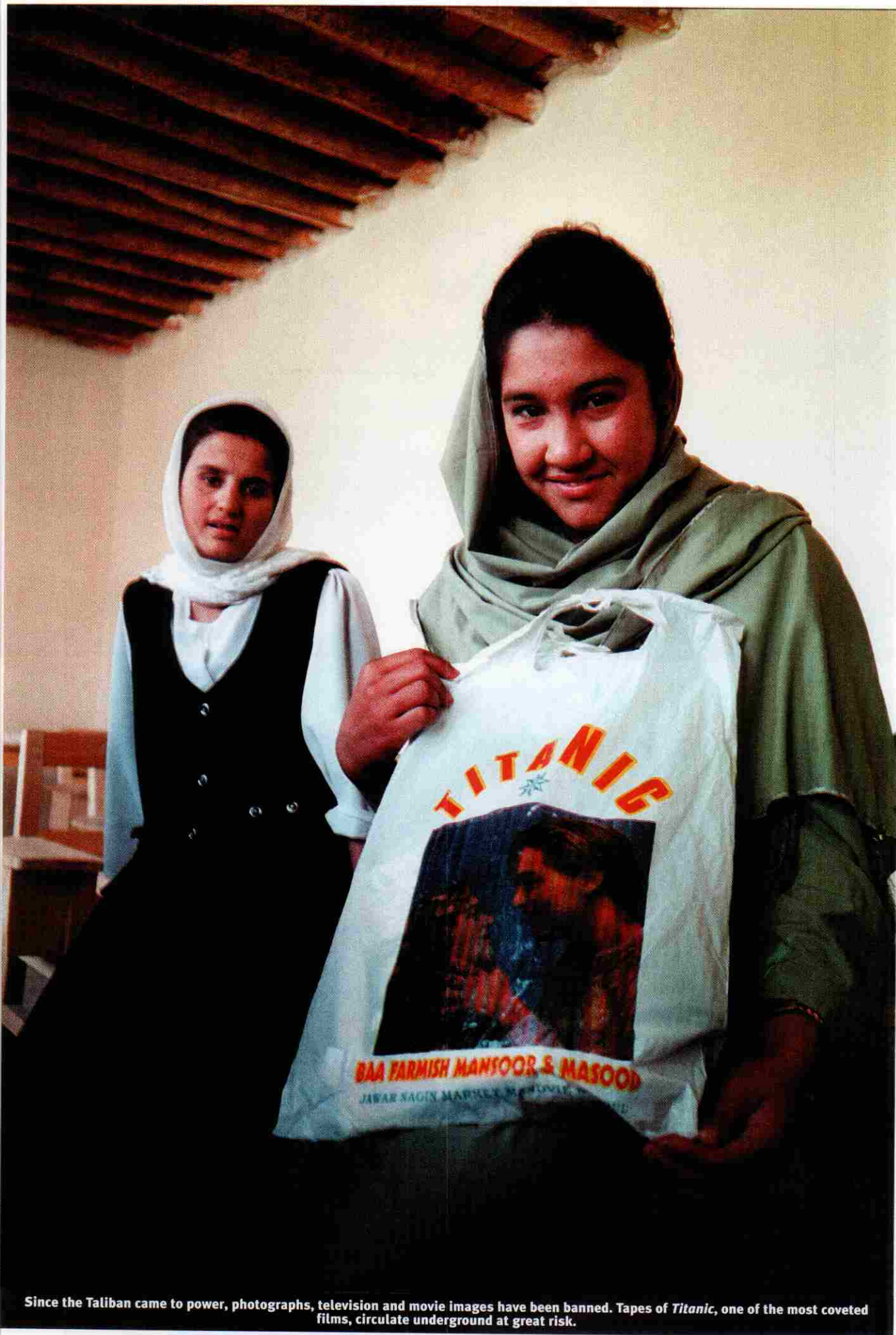
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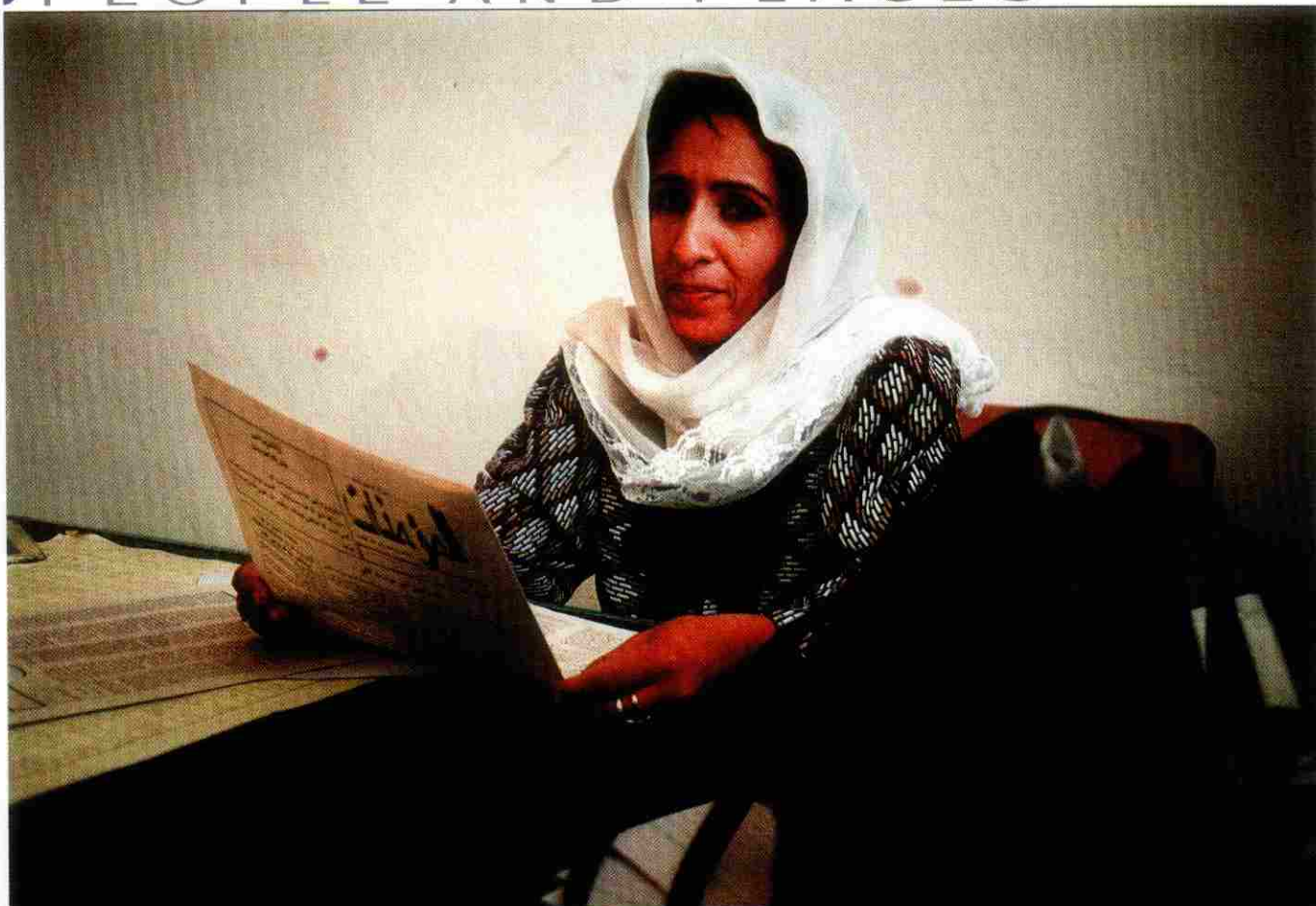
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This time, if we fail to hear this brilliant, exhausted nation's appeal, nothing will be left of it. The Afghans' legendary laughter will die out. And tears that no one sees will flow beneath the chadris.

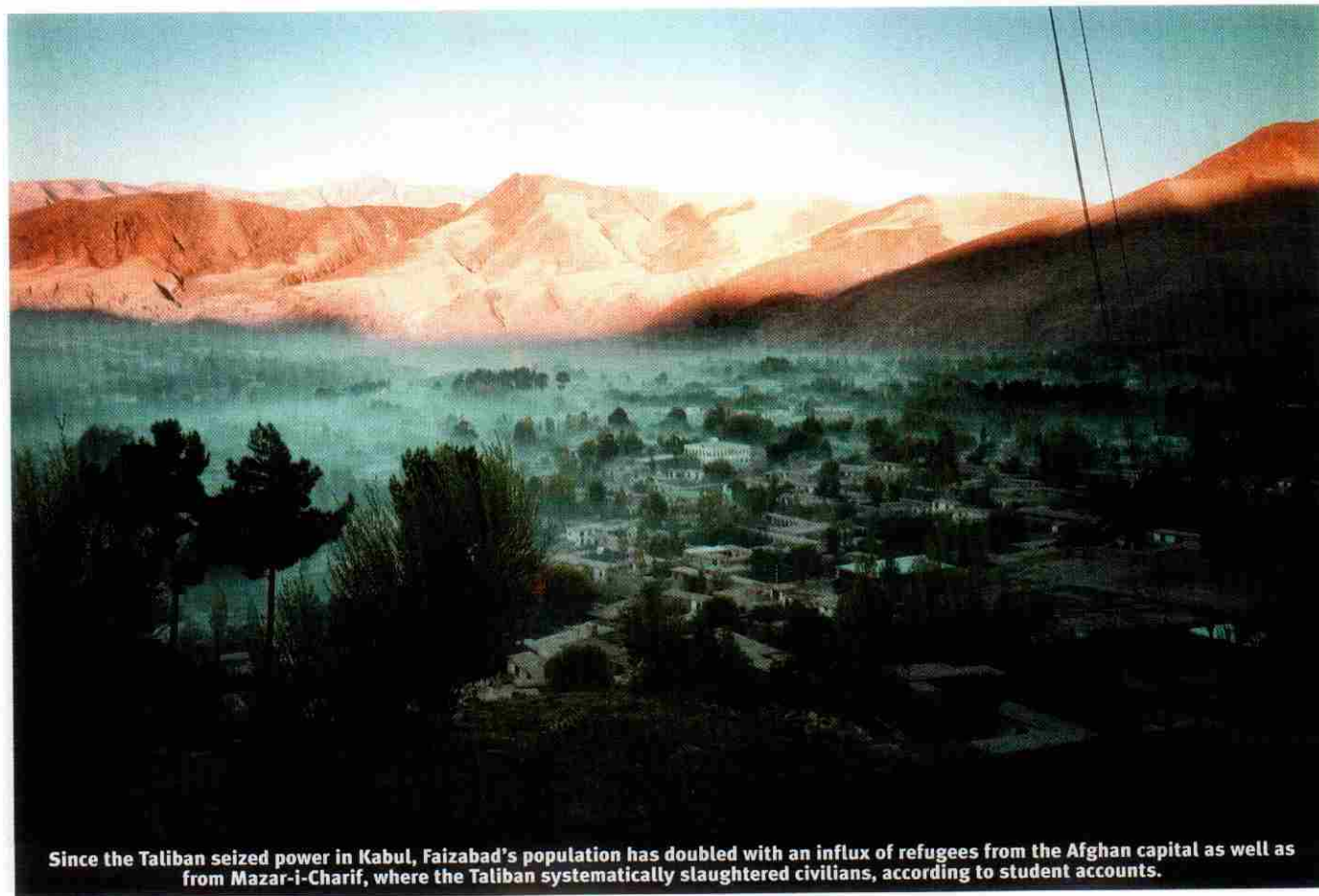




Since the Taliban came to power, photographs, television and movie images have been banned. Tapes of *Titanic*, one of the most coveted films, circulate underground at great risk.



According to Mari, the deputy director of the Pedagogical Institute, which shares quarters with the medical faculty, professors earn \$1.50 per month, a sum often paid with a three to six month delay.



Since the Taliban seized power in Kabul, Faizabad's population has doubled with an influx of refugees from the Afghan capital as well as from Mazar-i-Charif, where the Taliban systematically slaughtered civilians, according to student accounts.

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violence is the only possible response. And we have added a new burden to the already crushed silhouette of Afghan women.

Now they are wandering through the streets to the sounds of explosions beneath a sky that is raining bombs. I believe the time has come to ask Afghan women for forgiveness. Why do I say "we," when I myself was born in Afghanistan and head a humanitarian organization that has been campaigning for years to free Afghan women? Because there are two kinds of women: those condemned to wear the *chadri*—under pain of death—and those who are free not to.

I fall into the latter category. And I want to say it again: we have not done enough. The time has come. Afghanistan is on the brink of an abyss. This time, if we fail to hear this brilliant, exhausted nation's appeal, nothing will be left of it. The Afghans' legendary laughter will die out. And tears that no one sees will flow beneath the *chadris*. Let's make our own the destiny of these people whom blind History seems determined to abolish, to annihilate. Let's not turn Afghanistan into an insoluble country. ■



For more information on the plight of Afghan women, please refer to the *UNESCO Courier* issues dated October 1998 and March 2001.

* *Afghanistan Libre* ("For a free Afghanistan") is an organization that was created to help Afghans living outside Taliban-controlled areas to start rebuilding the country. The group focuses on education, training and micro-economic projects. It is currently building a high school for 1,000 girls in the Panshir Valley, and has opened a workshop for 300 women, who attend classes in the morning and work in the afternoon.



Students may wear lipstick, but even in this region, they shroud themselves in their *chadris* before heading out for the day. They live in permanent fear of the Taliban arriving in this last bulwark of freedom.

