

AFGHANISTAN DISPATCH

Reduced to Rubble, an Afghan Village Struggles to Rebuild

A small village outside Ghazni found itself on a critical supply artery in war-torn Afghanistan. It paid a heavy price.

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ARZO, Afghanistan — When Muhammad Akram Sharifi returned to the village he was forced to flee over a year ago, he was devastated. The mosque, the school and the shops in the bazaar were all in ruins. So was his house.

“My children, my grandchildren — 22 people used to live here,” Mr. Sharifi said last week. “And now it is all reduced to rubble. My pockets are empty. What will we do?”

It is impossible to say how much ammunition was spent in the fight between the Taliban and the Afghan government over the village, Arzo. It is just a dusty settlement of about 300 houses perched on a rolling hill. But it is also a strategic entry point into Ghazni city, a prize in the long war in Afghanistan.

Bullet holes and caved-in structures are visible at every turn. The destruction is everywhere, seemingly frozen in time.

Most of Arzo’s residents left before the fighting started. But according to Hajji Shahadullah and other villagers, 40 civilians were killed and at least 60 were wounded in the crossfire and in explosions over the last 15 months. Among the dead were two of his children.



Villagers at a mosque in Arzo. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times



A view over Arzo. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

With the Taliban victorious, what will happen next for the people of Arzo is uncertain. International aid money to Afghanistan has been frozen, and the new government's ability to provide public services — let alone rebuild villages like Arzo that were practically destroyed in the fighting — is unproven. Food is starting to get harder to find, residents say.

When the Taliban made their swift advance across the country over the summer, many villages and cities were handed over without a fight. Local deals were cut, weapons and ammunition taken and soldiers sent home.

But other places became flash points, among them Arzo, a village six miles southwest of Ghazni city, the provincial capital. And when they did, protracted standoffs took an enormous human and material toll.

With the fighting now largely quiet, areas of the country that were previously off limits are now accessible. A visit to places like Arzo, once home to over 10,000 residents, offers a glimpse at how the recently concluded battles were waged.

"A nearby army base was overrun a few years ago," Mr. Sharifi recalled. "They rebuilt it next to my house. The Taliban fought from my home and dug tunnels to other houses so they could move around undetected."



Javid Sharifi stands over what he said was the entrance to a tunnel dug by the Taliban in his house. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times



A tunnel said to be dug by the Taliban in a house in Arzo. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

The village of Arzo lies on a main artery connecting the provinces of Ghazni and Paktika. It was a lifeline for embattled southeastern provinces, and the Afghan government wanted to keep it open at all costs, explained Fazel Karim, the headmaster of the local boys' school.

That put the village in the cross hairs of the Taliban.

Mr. Karim's school paid a particularly heavy price in the days before the fall of Ghazni city, on Aug. 12, as government forces dug in.

"They built army bases along the route, many of them on private lands," he said. "One outpost was built just outside the school walls."

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On a recent visit, laborers could be seen working away to rebuild one of those walls.

One of the men said the Taliban had taken position inside the premises, digging a tunnel that led to the army base out front. The insurgents used that tactic often to attack the Afghan security forces' many outposts. In the courtyard, a dump of dust and rocks was visible where a 10-foot-wide tunnel entrance used to be.



A damaged classroom at the Ali Lala High School in Arzo. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times



Laborers at work by the damaged toilets outside the Ali Lala High School. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Mr. Karim said that when the security situation in Arzo started to deteriorate, the education department decided to move the classes to a village closer to the city.

"The Taliban entered the school and started the fight from here," he said. "As a result, the whole school was destroyed. A bomb was dropped from the air in early August and hit one of our classrooms." The school's corrugated metal roof now lies crumpled, like a gaping wound.

After the new Taliban government announced that schools were to reopen, the classes returned to the ruined compound and students started trickling back in. Rows of bicycles now line the shot-up walls of the three squat buildings.

"Not all of our 1,100 boys are here yet, because some families are still displaced," Mr. Karim said. "Not everyone has returned." The girls' school has reopened too, but only up to the sixth grade.



A class at Ali Lala High School. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times



Students at the school. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

At a local mosque, the smell of fresh paint lingered. Inside, villagers spoke of the challenges that endured.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

Mr. Sharifi said that food prices had doubled over the past few weeks. Many items are not available in villages, and people have had to travel to the city to try to find them. Flour shortages have been of most concern for the villagers. With prices rising so sharply, many shopkeepers had stopped buying it themselves.

In Ghazni, outside the governor's compound, burqa-clad women were lining up to register for government assistance. They said the Taliban had announced that women were not allowed outside without a male relative, but a drive through the city revealed many ignoring that directive.



Afghans gather outside the gates of the provincial governor's compound seeking food and economic assistance in Ghazni. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times



An old Soviet tank sits in the ruins of the fortress overlooking Ghazni. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Ghazni is an important hub connecting Kabul to the south and west of the country. It once served as the capital of the Ghaznavid Empire, which in the 11th century extended from modern-day Iran to the Indian subcontinent. More recently, U.S. Special Forces deployed here after the Taliban launched a surprise offensive into the city in August 2018. It was one of the last times the American military committed ground troops to stop a Taliban attack.

At a police station at the foot of Ghazni's treasured citadel, a Taliban member who identified himself only as Omar was at a gathering of fellow fighters after midday prayer. He said he had been at the battle for Arzo.

"I started jihad against the Americans 16 years ago — now I am 31," he said, bragging as he scrolled through photos and videos of him posing on rooftops with his Russian marksman rifle.



A mosque in Ghazni. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times



Omar, 31, a Taliban fighter, prays in a mosque in Ghazni. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

One video showed a half-dozen Afghan soldiers dead on a road, their vehicle smoking.

“We ambushed them near Arzo,” Omar said. “Everyone in that village knows me.”

The gravel roads of Arzo, lined with mud brick houses where so much death and destruction transpired in the months past, are slowly coming back to life. Residents are dribbling back in, many of them working to rebuild what was lost. Young and old have been shoveling, hoisting iron buckets and packing layers on top of layers of mortar.

Mr. Sharifi built his house in Arzo 15 years ago, he said. Last week, he looked at its remains from atop another pile of rubble.

“Back then,” he said, “there was money, there were jobs. Now we have nothing.”



A man walks past a building damaged by fighting in Arzo. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times