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## The Revenge Rape of Afghanistan

By Anna Badken

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**Anna Badken of Foreign Policy relays her visit with the victims of Afghanistan's revenge rapes. In the evolution of warfare guns have replaced swords but rape remains the constant weapon, for rape in Afghanistan carries a mark of disgrace.**

Kampirak

O, daughters of Balkh! Your unrivaled beauty is the stuff of legends. One of your own has enchanted Alexander the Great with her pulchritude. And the violence you have suffered under the breast-shaped clay roofs of your Baktrian homes is unspeakable, unspoken, and unpunished.

In late 2001, after helping kick the Taliban out of northern Afghanistan, two militias allied with the United States raped and plundered their way through your villages. One was the ethnic Uzbek militia of General Abdul Rashid Dostum; the other was made up of ethnic Hazara followers of the warlord Muhammad Mohaqiq. They killed your men, slaughtered and stole your livestock, pillaged your homes, and violated your sisters, mothers, and daughters. Some of them took the time to explain why they had picked you as their victims: Because you are Pashtun, the ethnic group that made up most of the Taliban.

They were victorious; they were in the mood to avenge the rapes and massacres Taliban fighters had committed against their own wives, sisters and daughters. In the evolution of warfare, swords replaced javelins and guns replaced swords -- but rape has remained just as efficient a weapon as it was when the Achaemenid armies lay waste to this land, 2,600 years ago. You,

daughters of Balkh, were the latest targets of the latest revenge cycle that swept through your country. Wheat in your fields has shuddered at the anguished screams of generations of your foremothers.

Eight years ago, four Pashtun women told me of their assailants, three fighters from Dostum's militia, Junbish-e-Milli-e-Islami who took turn raping them all night. Technically, only one of them, Nazu, was a woman; her daughters were 10, 12, and 14. The youngest, Bibi Amina, was playing with the fringe of the giant red scarf that covered her head and smiling. It seemed to me that she had not understood what had been done to her. The local police chief, an ethnic Tajik, said at the time that his men were too few, and too poorly armed, to hunt down the assailants. He was waiting for reinforcements.

Years passed; the militiamen who ravaged the Pashtun villages in Balkh remained free. Their warlords became government ministers; their lower-ranking commanders received posts in parliament; many of the rank-and-file fighters joined the police and the army. Their victims stopped talking about the crimes they had endured: Rape in Afghanistan carries a mark of unutterable disgrace.

In the same villages I visited years ago, I now find different women grieving quietly, and alone, under their breast-shaped roofs -- perfect hemispheres that face the limpid clay sky and virescent fields of wheat. They knead their tragedies into the golden sundials of nan they bake in smoky tandoor ovens in their impoverished courtyards; they weave them into the oil-black braids of their young, beautiful daughters; they immure them into the crumbling house walls they mend with fistfuls of straw and mud. When they do speak of those terrible days after the Taliban fell, they equivocate.

"They touched all the women and the teenage girls," one widow, whose cheeks and forehead are dotted with deep-blue marks of tribal tattoos, whispers to me in the corner of her dust-choked house.

"They dragged us out of our homes. Women and girls are ashamed to talk about what happened then," says another, modestly covering her face with a tattered scarf the color of ripe wheat.

"In my father's house they gathered all the women in one room," says the third. Her amber eyes bore through me. "We will never forgive these crimes. Until we die."

Last month, the Afghan government confirmed that it had signed into force the National Stability and Reconciliation Law -- and what a tragic misnomer that is. The law effectively amnesties all warlords and fighters responsible for large-scale human rights abuses in the preceding decades. "Their view," says Farid Mutaqi, a human rights worker in Mazar-e-Sharif, "is that justice should be the victim of peace."

You know what this means, daughters of Balkh: This means your rapes will never be punished. Perhaps, in some future iteration of war that has been rolling back and forth through these green

wheat fields almost incessantly for millennia, they will be avenged -- through some other rapes, of some other women.