

Afghanist

After more than 20 years
of war, Afghanistan's
people look forward to
freedom and peace.



A brother and sister walk south
of Kabul, between walls pocked
by bullets and shrapnel.

an's Children

By Lucian Kim in Mazar-i-Sharif

It might seem strange to call Razma Qasemiar (*KAH-sim-yar*) a lucky girl. Razma, 12, lives with her parents and two brothers in a three-room house with no electricity, telephone, or running water. On the way to school each morning,

Razma passes pick-up trucks filled with soldiers who carry machine guns and rocket launchers.

But Razma is more fortunate than most children in Afghanistan. Her family is together, and her father has a job with an aid organization.

Plus, Razma knows how to read. She is lucky to attend school in her hometown of Mazar-i-Sharif (*MAH-zahr EE Shah-REEF*).

A Country in Ruins

Afghan teens can only dream about the things that kids in America take for granted, such as TVs and video games. After more than 20 years of war and drought, most of Afghanistan is in ruins. Millions of people have fled their homes and are going hungry.

Learning is considered a privilege in a country where up to 80 percent of the population cannot read or write. For more than three years, Razma went to a secret school in a friend's home. The Taliban (*TAH-lee-bahn*), Islamic extremists who ruled Afghanistan, did not allow women to work or girls to attend school.

Whenever Razma's mother left their house, she was forced to wear a *burka* (*BUR-kah*), a garment that covers the entire body, including the face. Because of the Taliban's strict laws, music, TV, and even kite-flying were banned.

Defeating the Taliban

For years, the Taliban provided a refuge for Osama bin Laden, a wealthy Saudi Arabian terrorist. U.S. officials say that bin Laden masterminded the September 11 attacks on the U.S. For several years, he has headed a

network of terrorists called Al Qaeda (*al KEYE-duh*).

After the attacks, President Bush demanded that the Taliban hand over bin Laden and other terrorists. When the Taliban refused, the U.S. launched air strikes against Taliban and Al Qaeda forces (*see pp. 6-7*).

The air strikes helped Afghan rebels, known as the Northern Alliance, to drive the Taliban from power. In December, after an international conference in Germany, an interim (temporary) government took charge in Afghanistan.

Tracking down Al Qaeda terrorists has proved more difficult. Secret cells (groups) of terrorists are scattered in countries around the world, including the U.S.

Hiding Out

Razma has known violence for most of her life. During the recent fighting in Mazar-i-Sharif, she hid in the basement of her house with her mother and younger brother.

Now, life is returning to normal. Razma awakens each day at sunrise

when calls to prayer are broadcast over loudspeakers. She prays five times a day, a ritual for devout Muslims.

Razma's school, which reopened in December, is just for girls. The building is in terrible condition. It had been closed since 1998, when the Taliban captured Mazar-i-Sharif. There are no blackboards, desks, or tables. Cardboard covers some of the windowpanes.

Razma's mother teaches Dari, one of Afghanistan's main languages, at the school. She works for free because there is no money to pay teachers.

After school lets

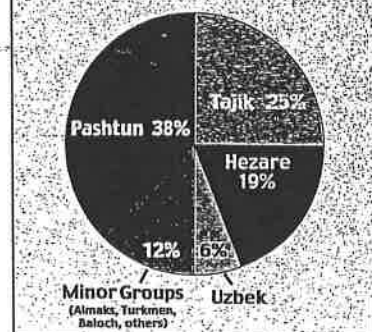


ALAN CHIN

Razma Qasemiar, 12, talks with friends after school.

Afghanistan's Ethnic Groups

Afghanistan has been torn by years of ethnic conflict.



out at noon, Razma attends a private English class. Many young Afghans are eager to learn English, especially after years of isolation from the outside world.

In her free time, Razma skips rope with her cousin or plays with her only toy, a stuffed rabbit. Razma has no idea what the Internet is, and she has never heard of Britney Spears or Jennifer Lopez. She knows little about the September 11 terror attacks, only that something terrible happened.

As a girl in a conservative, male-dominated society, Razma spends a lot of time at home, helping her mother with household chores. She is now learning how to cook traditional Afghan foods such as **mantu** (dumplings), **kofta** (meatballs), and **palow** (rice pilaf).

Work-filled Days

Work is a normal part of life for kids in Afghanistan. But many young Afghans spend the entire day doing grown-up jobs. Children work as farmers, cooks, shopkeepers, and even soldiers.

Abdullah, 13, works full-time as a locksmith with his father, Awaz. (Like many Afghans, they use only one name.)

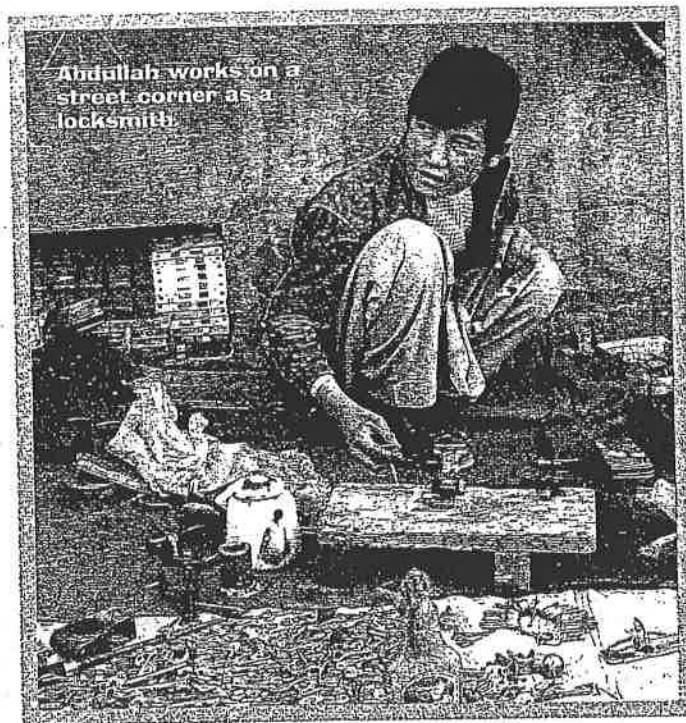
"We work here from sunrise to sunset every day," says Abdullah.

Because they are too poor to pay rent for a shop, Abdullah and his father wait for customers on a dusty street corner in Mazar-i-Sharif.

"If Abdullah went to school, I wouldn't be able to feed my family," says Awaz.

Together they make about \$6 per day, barely enough for Awaz to support his wife and nine children.

Each morning, Abdullah and his father walk to work, about an hour



Abdullah works on a street corner as a locksmith.

away. Abdullah stays behind and runs the business when his dad goes off to repair a lock. Father and son take only one day off a week.

Abdullah would love to play soccer with his friends, but his family doesn't have enough money to buy a ball. Besides, he has little free time.

A History of War

Afghanistan's people have known war for most of the past 20 years. In 1979, the former Soviet Union invaded the country.

For 10 years Afghans fought the Communist forces. The U.S. supplied the anti-Communist Islamic fighters, known as **mujahedeen** (*moo-JAH-hed-deen*), with \$3 billion worth of aid.

The mujahedeen finally defeated the Soviets in 1989. After the Soviet troops pulled out, the world forgot about Afghanistan. But fighting continued among Afghan ethnic **factions** (groups). There are about 20 ethnic groups in Afghanistan, and many have their own language and culture.

By 1998, a group of mostly Pashtuns, who became known as the Taliban, had seized power in 85 percent of Afghanistan. The Taliban followed an extreme form of Islam, and enforced strict rules of behavior.

Following Dreams

How do Awaz and Abdullah feel about the war in their country? Hammerin' away at a broken key, Abdullah says, "The Americans are here to find Osama bin Laden. They're looking for him because of the September 11 attack."

Thinking about the future, Awaz says he wants his son to do more than fix locks.

"If the situation gets better, I'll be able to send him to school," says Awaz. "If a person is uneducated, it's as if he were blindfolded."

Awaz, whose father was a farmer, started working at age 12 and never learned to read or write. He and Razma's parents are hopeful that the defeat of the Taliban, and international aid, will give their children new opportunities.

Razma's father doesn't want his daughter to wear the burka when she gets older. "I don't like the burka," he says. "In other countries, women can reach for the sky. But in our country, they are under the veil."

He encourages Razma to follow her dream to go to medical school and become a doctor. "If there is peace," says Razma's mother, "maybe she will have a bright future." ■



<http://www.time.com/time/photoessays/afghan/>

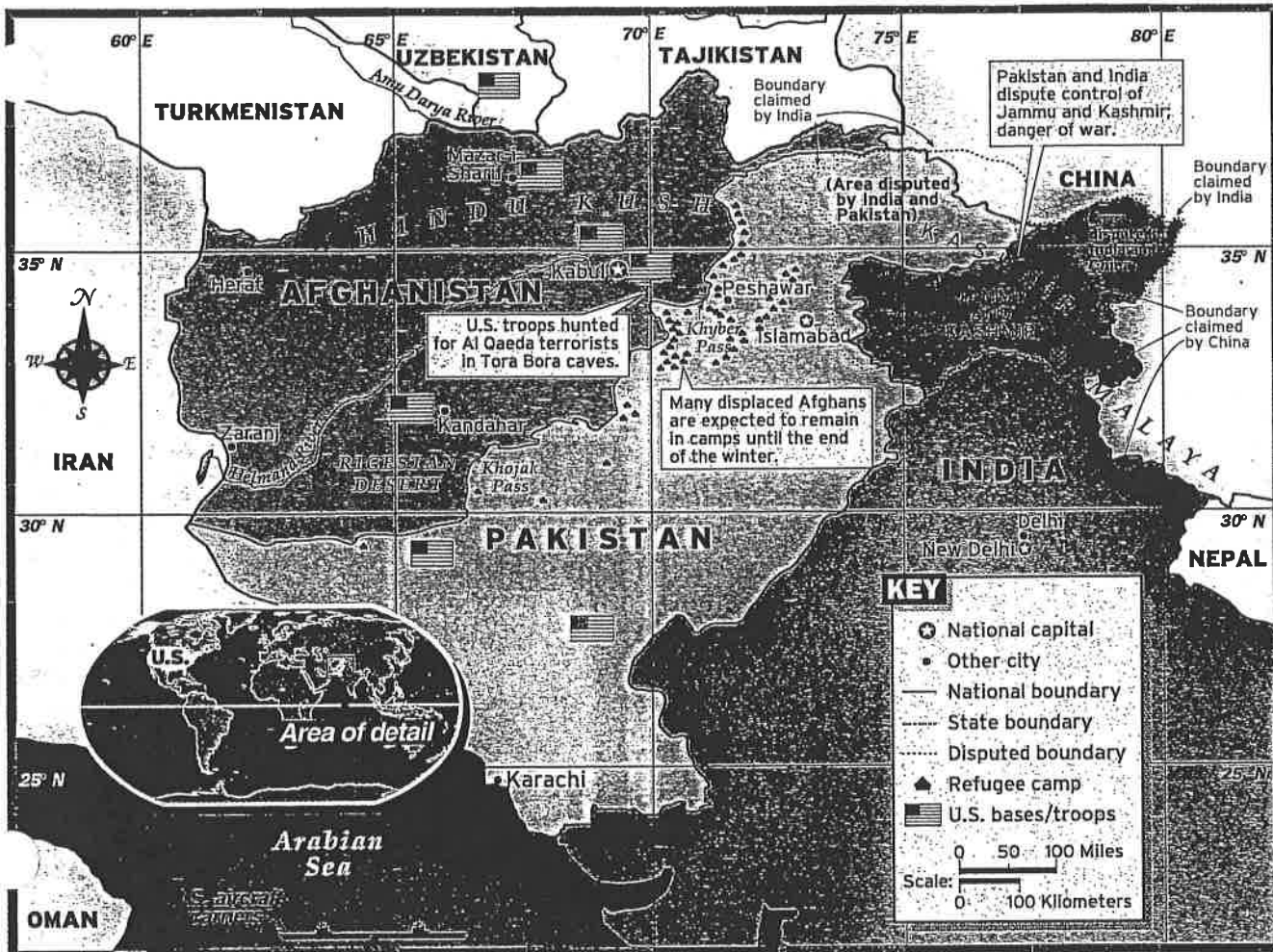
Your Turn

Word Match

- | | |
|-------------|----------------------|
| 1. Al Qaeda | A. meatballs |
| 2. Interim | B. groups |
| 3. kofta | C. rice pilaf |
| 4. palow | D. terrorist network |
| 5. factions | E. temporary |

Think About It

How would you compare "normal life" of Afghan kids with that of young people in the U.S.?



Southwest Asia has been in the spotlight since last October when the U.S. began bombing raids in Afghanistan. In this war against terrorism, the U.S. has sought and won the cooperation of neighboring countries.

Now the U.S. is worried that a dispute between India and Pakistan over control of Kashmir may lead to war. This could take attention away from U.S. efforts to defeat terrorists and help rebuild Afghanistan. Experts say that rebuilding could cost as much as \$45 billion.

AFGHANISTAN

AREA: 251,772 square miles, not quite as large as Texas.
POPULATION: 26,800,000; 22% urban; 43% of the population is under age 15.
GOVERNMENT: Hamid Karzai leads an interim (temporary) government. Later this year, a *loya jirga* (grand council) of tribal leaders will draft a government to serve until elections are held.

* The value of all products produced by the country in a year, divided by the population. (GDP stands for gross domestic product; per capita means per person.)

ECONOMY: The World Bank has called Afghanistan "the poorest, most miserable state in the world." War and drought have ravaged the economy. Most Afghans are farmers.
PER CAPITA GDP*: \$800.
RELIGION: Muslim, 99%.
LITERACY: Males, 47%; females, 15%.
LIFE EXPECTANCY: Males, 46 years; females, 44 years.

Questions

Study the map and Facts to Know to answer the following questions.

1. What city is located closest to 35°N 70°E? _____
2. What city shown on the map is northwest of Afghanistan's capital? _____
3. What is the straight-line distance in miles between the capitals of Afghanistan and Pakistan? _____
4. The Hindu Kush is a chain of mountains north of what city? _____
5. U.S. bases and troops are located in Pakistani and what other country bordering Afghanistan? _____
6. U.S. aircraft carriers are located in what large body of water? _____
7. Afghanistan is bordered on the west by what country? _____
8. Many refugee camps are located along Pakistan's border with what country? _____
9. Control of Kashmir is disputed by Pakistan, India, and what other country? _____
10. What is a *loya jirga*? _____



WELCOME TO SKATEISTAN

A skateboarding program brings hope to the war-weary kids of Afghanistan

WATCH
THE VIDEO
www.scholastic.com/js

Amid the rubble of bombed-out buildings in Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, rises a joyous sound. Shrieks of laughter mix with the rattle and clack of skateboard wheels as a group of kids gets a chance to do something all too rare in their lives: just be kids. A program called Skateistan is giving them that chance.

Until five years ago, none of them had ever seen a skateboard, let alone ridden one. Afghanistan, a country in central Asia, has been at war for decades. In 2001, the U.S. and its allies invaded Afghanistan to attack Al Qaeda. That's the group responsible for the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people in the U.S. The war, now in its 11th year, has led to the deaths of more than 2,000 U.S. military personnel.

WORD TO KNOW

- **ethnicities** (*n*): groups of people who have the same racial, religious, or cultural background and a shared sense of identity

The kids of Kabul are familiar with the sounds of gunfire and the sight of troops on patrol and tanks rumbling by. But in 2007, something altogether different rode past: an Australian named Oliver Percovich (*below*) on a skateboard.

Percovich, who had moved to Kabul to be with his aid-worker girlfriend, quickly attracted a crowd of fascinated kids. He stopped to teach them how to do some simple tricks of their own—and Skateistan was born.

Percovich's organization now has two facilities in Afghanistan (*see map*). Each is a combination of school and skate park, offering hundreds of kids a safe place to learn and play.

"We have students from a huge range of backgrounds: literate and illiterate, rich and poor, different ethnicities," Percovich tells *JS*. "One of Skateistan's

main goals is to build trust and understanding between [them]." In addition to skateboarding, kids can enjoy art, photography, theater, and other creative activities.

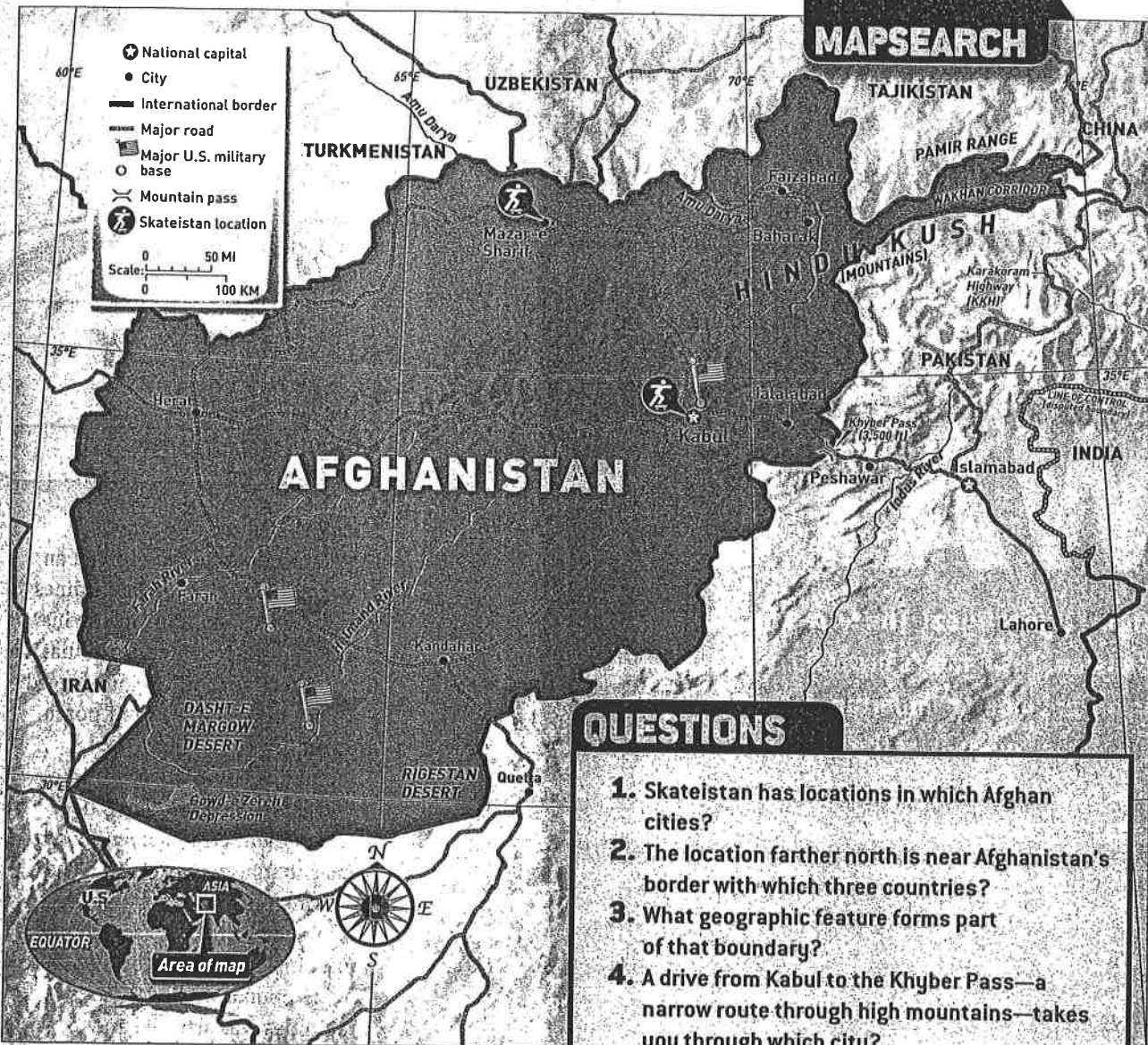
At Skateistan, nearly as many girls as boys are practicing kick flips, ollies, and truckstand spins. That's rare in Afghanistan, where until recently girls and women weren't even allowed to go to school or go out in public without long gowns and veils.

"It feels good that we are all having fun together," says Durkhanai Stanekzai (*dur-KAHN-eye stah-NEK-zay*), 13. Once a Skateistan student, she's now a paid instructor and able to help support her family. "It's special here," she says.

"To many children and their families, it is hard to even think about what is possible the next day," Percovich says. But, he adds, "in the short term, we put smiles on their faces." —Kathy Wilmore



MAPSEARCH



QUESTIONS

1. Skateistan has locations in which Afghan cities?
2. The location farther north is near Afghanistan's border with which three countries?
3. What geographic feature forms part of that boundary?
4. A drive from Kabul to the Khyber Pass—a narrow route through high mountains—takes you through which city?
5. The Khyber Pass connects Afghanistan and what country?
6. The U.S. military bases shown in southern Afghanistan are between which two waterways?
7. Afghanistan's southernmost area is largely what kind of terrain?
8. A drive west from Kabul takes you to which Afghan city shown?
9. Which city lies closest to 32°N, 66°E?
10. What is the name of the narrow strip of Afghanistan that borders China?



FAST FACTS

AREA: 252,072 sq mi (U.S.: 3,717,796 sq mi)
POPULATION: 33.4 million (U.S.: 314 million)
PER CAPITA GDP*: \$1,000 (U.S.: \$49,000)
ETHNIC GROUPS: Pashtun, 42%; Tajik, 27%; Hazara, 9%; Uzbek, 9%; Almak, 4%; Turkmen, 3%; Baloch, 2%; other, 4%
PERCENT OF POPULATION UNDER AGE 15: 46% (U.S.: 20%)
MEDIAN AGE: 18 (U.S.: 37)
LITERACY: males, 43%; females, 13% (U.S.: 99%/99%)

*GDP stands for gross domestic product; per capita means "per person." The amount is the value of all goods and services produced in a country in a year, divided by the population. It often is used as a measure of a nation's wealth.

SOURCES: The World Factbook (CIA) and 2012 World Population Data Sheet (Population Reference Bureau)