

Kabul's Sad "Attraction"

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Ravaged by mujahedin rockets and neglected by the Taleban, Kabul Zoo - once one of the capital's top attractions - is a shadow of its former self.

There was once a time when the Afghan capital was a different place. In August 1967, a proud new zoo was opened here. Kabulis would come to relax and bring their children. Friendly governments sent it gifts. Now, half of it lies in ruins.

The elephant died in a rocket attack, soldiers ate the deer, the lion killed a man and his brother threw a hand grenade at it in revenge.

Then, after the Taleban fled the city on November 12, Sheer Agha, its director was reduced to begging for food for the animals.

It was a different story in the Seventies. In a description of the zoo in her guidebook, Afghanistan, published in 1977, Nancy Hatch Dupree, writes, "A lion, a gift of Germany, has a regal run beside the Kabul river; the kangaroos from Australia have settled in nicely; the raccoons from the United States are raising a family. A three-year-old elephant presented by the Government of India arrived by air in June 1973."

The book is an extraordinary volume. It is still on sale, and remains one of the best sources of information on Afghanistan. But it is like reading a guide to a country that no longer exists.

It was published just two years before the Soviet invasion, which tipped Afghanistan into its wars.

The elephant, mentioned in Hatch Dupree's account, died in a rocket attack eight years ago when the mujahedin who had once fought the Russians started fighting one another.

The zoo lies in a district, which was shelled and rocketed mercilessly by one faction led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The elephant house remains a ruin. Its former occupant is buried nearby.

The kangaroos and raccoon are long gone, either they died, escaped or were killed. But the "German" lion is still here.

His face is lopsided; he can barely walk and is almost totally blind. He lost his sight when a man threw a hand grenade at him after he killed his brother who had climbed into his pen to tease him.

"There are crazy people everywhere," sighed Agha. Two years ago another man tried the same trick - and suffered the same fate, but this time, there was no revenge.

Today there are 19 species who live amongst the ruins. They include several monkeys, two porcupines, two wolves, some eagles, a wild cat, forty rabbits, a bear and a deer. The guards sleep in a room with a couple of dozen canaries, who pipe down at dark but wake them with song at dawn.

During the grim months when Hekmatyar's forces were rocketing Kabul, Agha and his colleagues could not come to work. But, "when the shelling died down, we would bring food and the guard who was here would give it to the animals. When we could not come he gave his own food to the animals," said the zoo keeper.

Hatch Dupree writes glowingly in her guide about the zoo's "considerable collection of fish and reptiles from all over the world" and the "very fine Zoological Museum...which was reopened in May 1972 after two years of modification and expansion".

All of this was destroyed by Hekmatyar's rockets - along with what little hope remained after the Soviet years, which had already snuffed out the spirit of the carefree city of the Seventies.

Then it had been a magnet for Hippies and it also shared something of a glamorous reputation amongst Arabs, Indians, Pakistanis and others - much like the similarly doomed Beirut.

At the same time as Hekmatyar's rockets rained down on the zoo, its director says mujahedin soldiers ate the deer and the rabbits, "because the guard could not stop them". Asked if they also ate the elephant after it was killed, he laughs and says, "No, that is not permitted by our religion".

Surprisingly, Agha does not believe that the months of rocketing were the worst time the zoo ever faced. "It was the Taleban period," he said. "They were always bothering people and they were uneducated and threw stones at the animals."

In one cage, a bear with an unhealed wound on his nose snuffles about for food. The keeper says he received the wound nine months ago when some Taleban beat him and his mate - which died.

But things could have been even worse, says Agha. "Once a Taleban commander came here and asked who was responsible. I said, 'I am' and then he asked me, 'is there one sentence in the Holy Koran which says we should have a zoo?' I said that there was not, so then he said, 'please take all the animals out.' I went to the mayor, who was little better, and he gave me a paper which I showed whenever we had any other problems."

After the Taleban fled Kabul, there was no money for food for the animals so the zoo keeper was reduced to begging market traders for credit. Now, however, he says that the new government has kept a promise he extracted from them and given him cash.

Still the staff have not been paid for three months and very soon their numbers are going to grow. Women who worked at the zoo will soon be coming back to their old jobs. Under the Taleban they were banned from the work place. "They are very happy," said Agha who is also hopeful that somehow he will find money to rebuild his zoo. "Please tell the world about our plight so that people can come and help us."

He is only speaking for the zoo, but as far as 23 million other Afghans are concerned this could be a plea for the whole of this shattered nation.

Tim Judah, author of *Kosovo: War and Revenge* (Yale University Press), is a regular IWPR contributor.

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