

Mazar Sobers Up After Taleban Defeat

Author: [Galima Bukharbaeva](#)

For the people of Mazar-e-Sharif the road back to normality will be long and hard.

The city of Mazar-e-Sharif, liberated by the forces of the Northern Alliance early last month, is adapting to a new way of life and a new order.

The relief and joy at being freed from the reactionary Taleban regime can be seen in the eyes of almost every inhabitant. Many relish doing the sort of everyday things which were proscribed by the student militia, like shaving, turning on the TV and listening to music in the car.

"The Taleban harshly punished people for the simplest things, such as watching television or walking in the street during times of prayer, but I hope that all that is behind us," said Amanullo, a taxi driver.

He, like many other men, recently got rid of his beard, to the amusement of his neighbours. "When I shaved it off, I went into the street and everybody who saw me began to laugh, and I laughed with them," he said. "We've gotten so out of the habit of seeing each other without beards that's it was very unusual."

The liberation of Mazar-e-Sharif has given people hope that the war will soon be over and that the country will return to normal. But it's clear that this process will be long and painful.

The city has been decimated by years of war. Thousands of people barely survive. The first thing one notices here are the beggars pleading with passers-by for bread, and the crowds of people in dirty, worn-out clothing, aimlessly wandering the streets. "There's no work, we loaf about, feeding ourselves on the odd scraps of money that we can earn," said one local resident.

Many of them have nothing better to do than follow Western journalists and humanitarian workers around the city. They watch their every movement with enormous interest. Foreign women, unfettered by yashmaks, are a particular source of fascination. Crowds gather outside the Barat Hotel every time a female correspondent walks out on to the balcony. "You can understand the people. They haven't seen a woman's face in three years," said Amanullo.

The new authorities in Mazar-e-Sharif, supporters of General Abdul Rashid Dostum, are now concentrating their efforts on maintaining security. The situation is relatively calm and one can walk around freely, but the town's governors warn against going beyond the city limits.

"Not all of the Taleban have left Mazar-e-Sharif," said a provincial official. "There are still some left on the outskirts of the city - they've still got their weapons and are capable of doing a lot of damage."

One local businessman, Farhad, said he saw a Taleban mercenary from Uzbekistan at the market. He said he had shaven off his beard and was wondering around the city unchallenged. Farhad and others suggest there are dozens, possibly thousands, of people like him.

As the authorities here are still preoccupied with helping their comrades subdue the last remaining pockets of Taleban resistance elsewhere in the country, they have little time or energy to focus on improving social and economic conditions.

People here are clearly in need of urgent aid shipments. International agencies are doing their best, but ordinary Afghans say what they've provided so far is simply not enough.

"Dostum only recently came to power and his people haven't had time to begin work on humanitarian and social problems, nor to assess how many people need food - and they certainly haven't had an opportunity to think about how to get people back into work," said the provincial official.

There are other concerns too. The Taliban may be gone, but their legacy, it seems, remains. The student militia spawned such intolerance that it will be a while before women will be confident enough to take off their yashmaks. And the new authorities are not above using the sort of violence associated with their predecessors.

Northern Alliance patrols on the streets have employed rifle butts and sticks to disperse crowds following journalists around the city. Few have protested at the rough tactics because they have become used to being beaten.

For all the problems they are encountering, people here remain optimistic about the future. They hope that soon the country's borders will be opened and that at long last the terrible isolation they've endured for years will finally come to an end.

Galima Bukharbaeva is IWPR regional director in Uzbekistan. Photographs were taken during her short trip to Mazar-e-Sharif between 25-27 November.

Location: [Uzbekistan](#)

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