

## **Medieval Afghan Fort Under Threat**

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Locals say important cultural site neglected after years of battle damage, and endangered by continuing army presence.

Hundreds of Afghans gathered at the Bala Hissar fortress near the southern town of Gardez last month to mark Nowruz, the start of the traditional new year.

Families celebrated as young men performed the traditional “attan” dance to the sound of drums. But as in previous years, they were annoyed to find that they were prevented from entering the castle.

Nine hundred years after it was built, the ancient fort, whose name means “high castle”, is still used as a military vantage-point, which makes it an off-limits facility controlled by Afghanistan’s defence ministry.

Local residents and officials in Paktia province agree that the fortress should be in the hands of civilian authorities who could preserve it from further disintegration, with a view to turning it into a tourist attraction in more stable times.

Gardez resident Hejratullah said military use of Bala Hissar was a continuing threat to the fort, which ought to be handed over to Paktia’s cultural affairs department.

“Historical sites like this should be restored and preserved as a reflection of our history,” he said. “But unfortunately, they are being lost instead.”

Although the high walls appear sound from the outside, about a third of the structures inside the castle have been damaged both by earthquakes and by three decades of war in Afghanistan.

“Most of the damage has been caused by the presence of army forces in Bala Hissar, such as during the [1980s] Russian occupation, when the mujahedin fired rockets at the fort,” local resident Usman said. “Then, when the mujahedin took over [in 1992], they used the site to blow up tanks so as to sell off the scrap in Pakistan. The explosions caused a lot of cracks in Bala Hissar.”

About a year after the United States-led invasion in 2001, the fort was the scene of a major battle between the forces of Paktia governor Pacha Khan Zadran and a rival commander.

Historical strongpoints across Afghanistan have suffered serious damage from modern weaponry in recent conflict. The Qala-ye Jangi fort in the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif was badly blasted when troops put down a 2001 uprising by Taleban prisoners held there. That site, too, is still used by the Afghan army.

Noting the destruction done to Qala-ye Jangi and other sites like Kabul’s wrecked Darulaman Palace, writer and journalist Arefullah Haq-Parast said a change of policy was essential if they were to be saved.

“It makes no sense to station forces in historical sites, as many such places across the country have been destroyed because of the presence of the military,” he said. “After it is restored, Bala Hissar should be used as Paktia’s museum for historical artefacts, so that it is not only preserved but serves as an attraction for tourists.”

The director of Paktia province’s culture and information department, Mohammad Shefa Moshfeq, agreed that conservation was impossible at the moment.

“We are concerned about the current state of this historic site,” he said, adding that his department had formally asked its parent ministry in Kabul as well as the local army corps to facilitate a handover.

A spokesman for the 203rd Corps which garrisons the fortress, Colonel Ahmad Jan Mokhles, said the request had been forwarded to the defence ministry.

“We’ll follow whatever instructions the ministry of defence issues,” “Property ownership is not clearly delineate among Afghan government ministries, so we’ll make a decision once we get this clearance.”

Khaista Jan Ahadi, a member of Paktia’s provincial council, said she had been involved in a number of attempts to get Bala Hissar taken out of military hands.

“Several members of our council went to see the minister of information and culture [Sayed Makhdoom Raheen] last year, and he promised to get control shifted to his department, but that yet to materialise,” she said.

Abdul Ahad Abbasi, director of the ministry's department for protecting monuments, said negotiations on a possible handover were taking place with the defence ministry.

"There is a presidential decree on transferring the Bala Hissar forts in Gardez and Kabul to the information and culture ministry, but the defence ministry is not yet ready to do so," he said. "Donors won't fund any restoration project if army troops are housed in a historic monument. This is a problem when it comes to efforts to restore such sites."

Gardez residents say the fortress is also threatened by new houses being built illegally on the slopes of the hill it sits on.

"I went to the police station to complain about it, but they said it wasn't their responsibility," local man Ramatullah Rahimzai said. "When I complained to the Afghan army, they too said it wasn't within their mandate, so in the end I gave up."

For its part, Paktia's provincial government says there is little it can do to protect Bala Hissar, although deputy governor Abdul Wali Sahi promised action to stop further erosion around the site.

"Before embarking on any other plans, we are going to plant trees on the hillside of Bala Hissar to protect it from further destruction and make it green," he said.

**Sahil Mangal is an IWPR-trained reporter in southern Afghanistan.**

**Location:** [Afghanistan](#)

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