Ruined Libraries Rise from the Ashes

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Kabul's libraries were no more than targets for missiles in wartime but now a huge effort is underway to restore some of their old glory.

Attempts are underway to repair Kabul's war-ravaged libraries, which were mercillessly targeted by rival mujahedin factions during the bitter civil war of the early Nineties.

The mujahedin were of the opinion that they were stocked with books introduced by the despised pro-Soviet regime of Najibullah. Thousands of volumes were either looted or burnt, and rare titles smuggled and sold off for high prices in the antiquarian book markets of the United States, Europe and Japan, says researcher Khawaja Ghulam Jelani Shebal.

Jelani Shebal is one of three Afghan experts who have completed an exhaustive study of the state of the country's libraries. "Now there is no building in Afghanistan that truly deserves the title 'library'," he said.

But now a number of countries and international organisations are helping to restore these destroyed cultural treasures to the former glory, with the effort focussed on restocking and refitting them.

The National Library, on Malik Asghar Square, in the centre of Kabul, held about 200,000 books before 1992, including many antique European and Asian works. After the fall of the Taleban regime, only a few thousand remained on its battered shelves, salvaged from other libraries or donated by Afghan research and cultural groups.

Jelani Shebal estimates the library's stock - together with two branch libararies in the suburbs of Khairkhana and Qala-e-Fathullah - totals 70,000 volumes.

Second-hand bookstalls, many overlooking the park surrounding the library, are full of editions that still carry the library's stamps and Dewey decimal registration numbers. They were looted from its shelves over the years.

One small sign of Kabul's return to normality is that the library has begun to issue readers with membership cards, funded by the UN cultural organisation UNESCO. Cultural events and poetry readings are held there once again.

The Afghan culture minister, Said Makhdoom Raheem, says the city's entire library network will be restored and a new library set up for rare Islamic books, which were left to rot in abandoned buildings even under the radical Islamist rule of the Taleban.

The fate of the National Library was echoed elsewhere. Before 1992, the Library of the Academy of Sciences was the largest research centre in Kabul. Little research takes place now. "The building was a scene of a battle," said the library's head researcher, Sayed Amin Mujahed. "Hundreds of new books were destroyed in seconds."

The University Library, opened in 1964, was another victim. It used to contain about a million books, including a huge archive of scientific journals, some 7,000 academic monographs, more than 500 original
manuscripts and hundreds of bound archived copies of magazines and newspapers.

The building suffered badly in the fighting in 1992. "Only 20,000 books survived the conflict," said the chief librarian, Mohammad Sadiq Waheed. "All the rest were destroyed."

Some university staff bought back their own books from the second-hand stalls that had picked them up, years after they were looted by the warring factions. "After the fighting stopped we found ourselves scouring bookstalls looking for books with the faculty's stamp," said Professor Mohammad Sabir Khweshai, dean of the faculty of language and literature.

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The various faculties all suffered the same fate, says Professor Ahmadudin Marij, of the medical faculty. "In 1992 we had some 50,000 medical textbooks, mostly in English, on pathology, biochemistry, microbiology, anatomy and many other subjects. Today just 6,000 remain."

Medical student Mohammed Esmatullah says study is a frustrating business in such surroundings. "We can't find the books we need," he said. "We're using a few new books written and published by our professors and hope that more and more will be written and published soon."

A potential academic treasure trove of books lies in the city's National Archive, which was kept under lock and key throughout the Taleban years, and is still sealed. The contents of the archive, said to include a 1,000-year-old copy of the Koran, remain a closely-guarded secret, partly to ward off thieves working to supply the Western antiquarian book market.

A worldwide effort to restore the city's libraries is under way. Donations have come from Iran, France, the United States and various NGOs. UNESCO has refitted the University Library, installed computers and satellite-linked internet connections. The body has paid the shipping cost for a tonne of books donated by the British charity Book Aid International to go to the National Library.

A UNESCO appeal to journalism faculties worldwide resulted in more than 3,000 donated new editions being delivered to the university this month to replace the 50 or so surviving texts from the 1970s in the journalism faculty library.

In spite of its limited resources, the government's ministry of higher education has authorised new spending. Staff numbers at the University Library's main building have been increased from eight to 25, the building repaired and its lighting and central heating systems reconnected.

Ahmed Shah, a long time visitor to the National Library, was initially shocked by what had happened to his favourite spot after years of war and neglect. "I am the oldest user of this library and I'm very familiar with its works, but as far as I can see most of the books that were here in 1992 have just disappeared," he said.

But he was hopeful. "There are a lot more books here now than in the years after the wars, and there are still spaces to read and study. We are happy with the staff's efforts and happy once more to have the chance to study here in peace."

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