



Afghanistan: Jihad of the Airwaves

by Manosij Guha

Afghanistan is as vast as Texas, with a climate like Wyoming's and carbine culture to match. Landlocked, it shares smoldering borders with Iran, China, Pakistan and the former Soviet Union.

It is home to about 22 million—ten percent nomads, 90 percent farmers illiterate in any modern language. Four major tongues are spoken, but Dari, a form of Persian, and Pashto,

used by Pushtuns, are the major and official languages. Regional dialects abound.

In the summer of 1994, the Taliban movement of religious Afghan students emerged in reaction to widespread lawlessness in the south. They seized the old royal capital of Kandahar, and by February were at the gates of Kabul.

The Taliban owes much of its success to military support from Pakistan and financial aid from Saudi Arabia, both Sunni Muslim countries. Though relationships with the Saudis have chilled recently—not least because of the Taliban government’s refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden, the Saudi-born terrorist—private donations continue to pour in. Sporadic reports indicate that the United States has positioned a sizeable extraction force in Pakistan and the CIS to abduct bin Laden, besides readying its task force in the Arabian Sea to unleash another bout of cruise missile attacks on Osama camps spotted around Jalālābād.

Also reliably reported is that about 3,500 “retired” Pakistani army officers are acting as military advisers to the Taliban. Pakistan has also turned a blind eye to the thousands of young Pakistanis who have been joining the movement.

So concerned are the Russians with the Talibanization of Tajikistan, fearing another Chechnya or Dagestan on their doorstep, that they have gone all out for their erstwhile foe, opening up their choicest arsenal at virtually no cost for Ahmad Shah Masood, the rebel leader who opposes the Taliban. A cable hoist operates across the mighty Amu Darya river, which forms a natural border between northern Afghanistan and Tajikistan, carrying T-62 tanks and YA-3 jeeps to bolster the Tajik leader’s summer offensive. A ten-inch pipeline and truck convoys deliver precious diesel to the frontlines.

King Pioneers Broadcasting

Despite Afghanistan being in the backwaters of development, broadcasting in this rugged country can be traced all the way back to 1925, when two 200 Watt mediumwave AM transmitters were purchased from Telefunken in Germany. They lay dormant because of technical difficulties, scarcity of receivers and absence of trained personnel.



Osama bin Laden,
believed hiding near
Jalālābād, Afghanistan.

**Taliban forces
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A Few Good Men:
Commander Masood
insists that all his men at
arms don proper battle
fatigues so they can fight
with dignity against their
opponents. M. Guha

Anti-Taliban rebels operate Radio Takhar using a Russian RX-10 transmitter. M. Guha



However, three years later one of the transmitters began operating on 833 kHz on a sustained basis from the King's palace in Kabul. The other transmitter, meant for the eastern city of Kandahar, never got fixed. When King Amanullah was deposed in 1929, Radio Kabul, as the station was called, ceased to exist, as its transmitter was damaged and studio facilities destroyed.

Thus, broadcasting in earnest as we know it today started only in 1931, when the new monarch, Mohammed Nader Shah, decided to purchase another mediumwave AM transmitter from Germany, this time a mighty 100 kW which was installed a year later. In 1940, a 20 kW transmitter on 660 kHz was added to the repertory.

World Band Starts in 1958

In 1953, Radio Kabul was renamed the Afghan Broadcasting System, although it identified as Radio Afghanistan. World band became regular only in 1958, when a German 10 kW shortwave transmitter was installed in Yakatut in the northern suburbs of the capital.

The following year saw the formal inauguration of the shortwave service when two more 25 kW transmitters were installed.

These were on for about 17 hours a day, belting out programs in Pashto, Dari, Hindi and French—the last two ostensibly for a foreign audience. In 1957, a 50 kW transmitter was added to relay the Kabul home service, which included a 20-minute program in English.

In 1966, German aid allowed the addition of two more 100 kW shortwave transmitters, one of which was installed at a new transmitter site at Pol-e-Charki in the outskirts of Kabul. In 1976, a further three 50 kW and two 10 kW mediumwave AM units were installed at the bustling transmitter field in Yakatut. Additionally, three 10 kW mobile mediumwave AM transmitters were procured, which after a technical snag were installed in 1978 in the provincial stations at Herat, Kandahar and Mazar-e-Sharif.

On July 17, 1973, King Mohammed Zahir Shah was overthrown in a coup, and the kingdom became a republic. The coup leader, General Sadar Mohammed Daud, chose to announce the change of government in a fiery speech broadcast over Radio Afghanistan. As newspapers and magazines were suspended, for the Afghan people Radio Afghanistan became their information lifeline.

Radio Afghanistan played an active role in persuading the population to live peacefully, airing news, commentaries and martial music. However, the rhetoric towards Pushtunistan became more intense, inviting a media war with Pakistan.

Eleven-Year Boost from Russian Aid

Broadcasting remained stagnant during the ensuing turmoil and instability, but it received a major boost during the Soviet occupation between 1979 and 1989. The transmitting capacity at Pol-e-Charki was bolstered by a pair of 100 kW shortwave and two 500 kW mediumwave AM transmitters to help prop up the new communist regime. 1980 saw Radio Afghanistan's external services also being relayed by powerful transmitters in the Soviet Union, a service which continued until the fall of Sovietism in 1990.

In subsequent years Radio Afghanistan's shortwave activity was limited to a 50 kW transmitter hovering around 7200 kHz, with

a second transmitter operating intermittently on 4775 kHz. These broadcast about 14 hours a day, with an additional complement of two hours on Fridays, the Muslim day of rest. A 10 kW German shortwave transmitter was retrofitted for point-to-point communications, especially sending telegrams to Afghan embassies abroad and airing news dispatches by Bakhtar Agence, the official news agency.

In 1993, external services in Arabic, German, Russian and Urdu were initiated to strengthen foreign relations, adding to the existing services in French and Hindi. Subsequently, the radio network was expanded to establish provincial stations on mediumwave AM at Baghlan, Farah and Taloqan—that last station would play a significant role in times of strife.

Taliban Creates Voice of Shariah

When the Taliban militia overran the station in September 1996, the name was aptly changed to the Voice of Shariah. But

WITNESS TO ATROCITY

Ramjelani Sahyr, 55, is one of the many government servants who have left their house and family behind in Kabul. Since he was marked as a Rabbani opposition sympathizer, he can't go back to Kabul so long as the Taliban is in charge.

When the Taliban invaded Taloqan in August 1998, he ran away to the rebel-held Masood stronghold in the Andaraab valley, which was also laid siege by the Taliban for 13 days. He fought them with guns before taking refuge in the mountains.

Masood sympathizers were rounded up and summarily executed by the Taliban to create an example for others. On the way out Sahyr was witness to scores of young women—some barely 13 years old—being gang raped, with hordes of Taliban youth descending upon each hapless girl.

Sahyr chokes when he says, "Islam is good but the Taliban are not good. They are no Muslims and this is no *Sharia*. They take our money and rape our daughters, then say they are building a better Afghanistan. How?"



Ramjelani Sahyr

M. Guha

what transpired at one of the transmitter sites became among the most bizarre events in radio history.

When Taliban forces overran the Yakatut transmitter site, their Pakistani mentors told them there was gold and silver in the transmitter boxes, even inside the tubes. "They literally tore the transmitters apart with their bare hands, ravaging the station," laments Samshul Haq Aryanfar, then president of Afghan Radio, TV and Film. "When they didn't find anything, they set fire to the building."

For whatever reason, the newer transmitter site at Pol-e-Charki survived almost unscathed. It consists of two 100 kW Russian and one 100 kW Siemens shortwave transmitters, besides two huge 500 kW

mediumwave AM transmitters. The Russian transmitters are in serious disrepair, with spare parts and trained maintenance personnel a rarity since the Soviet pullout. But the sturdy 1966 Siemens continues to labor on, hovering around 7080 or 7200 kHz for a strenuous 17 hours a day, albeit at reduced power.

The limited external service of the Voice of Shariah is broadcast in the evening with a distorted signal. It airs programs in Urdu, Turkmen and Arabic, with a nightly 15-minute English stretch at 1700 hours World Time.

When the Taliban solidified its hold on power around Kabul in September 1996, a team of five dedicated men took it upon themselves to keep the official voice of

OUTLAWS IN UNIFORM

The only practical link with the outside world maintained by Afghan rebels is the Taloqan-Dushanbe air bridge. A dilapidated Kazak Mi-17 helicopter, still replete with Soviet markings, shuttles a fortunate few and visiting journalists between the Tajik capital and north Afghan towns controlled by rebel forces. Afghan pilots fly across undulating hills and high mountains without radio contact or radar, adding to the perils they face from unreliable machines and trigger-happy Russian soldiers.

Arriving Afghans are a constant source of amusement and money for corrupt Russian guards in charge of immigration and customs at the Dushanbe airport. When we arrived at dusk, what followed was an exercise in methodical exploitation of hapless people.

Afghan passengers were singled out and herded like cattle to the far corner of the tarmac. They were summarily told that they would be deported if they do not have a valid entry visa, which they could not possibly obtain in their strife-torn country. Then a \$100 bribe per person was demanded, a king's ransom for today's Afghans.

All this took place while the Afghan pilot pleaded to take off, as he needed to get back to Taloqan before sundown. But the Russian guards would not hear of it. Instead, a small tanker was hauled next to the aircraft and the plane's fuel partially pumped out despite frantic cries from the pilot that he had barely enough fuel to get back. Then the resilient Afghans kneeled to say a few words in prayer while the resolute Afghan pilot took off in darkness towards Afghanistan, hoping to land safely on fumes and the mercy of Allah.



Afghan pilot prepares for hazardous takeoff. M. Guha

Afghanistan alive. First a mobile short-wave transmitter was moved by truck to Mazar-e-Sharif, where it broadcast from the premises of the existing station. When Mazar fell, the station moved to a makeshift base in the Panjshir valley, then to its current location in Taloqan.

The present facilities are actually those of the clandestine station of the Tajik opposition, Radio Free Tajikistan, which broadcast for a few years against the pro-Soviet regime in Dushanbe. With the signing of the peace accord in Kabul in 1994, the clandestine station ceased operations and the facilities fell vacant. They were used later by Radio Takhar, the official voice of the Afghan opposition. Radio Free Tajikistan was revived for six months in 1996, when the political climate in neighboring Tajikistan was inclement once again and there was a need for the Tajik opposition to make clandestine broadcasts back to their country.

When the Taliban took over Takhar province in August 1998, most employees fled. During the two month siege the radio station was



Frontline schools: Unlike in the fundamentalist Taliban-controlled areas, Afghan girls in northern Afghanistan attend school. M. Guha

simply renamed Voice of Shariah of Takhar Province, in line with all other Taliban-controlled provincial radio stations.

Opposition Revives Radio Takhar

Anti-Taliban forces recaptured Radio Takhar on October 17, 1998. The next day Radio Takhar was heard with its hour-long

MAN WITH NO COUNTRY

Nikolai Sakharov is 38 and barely recognizable in his thick beard and regulation *salwar kameez*, but his hazel-blue eyes, gold-filled teeth and chaste Russian are a dead giveaway. He fled the Russian army but is no ordinary deserter. Nikolai Sakharov “went native.” He is a turncoat, a man with no country.

He first came to Afghanistan as a private in the Soviet Army. When his commandant beat him over a minor accident with his APC, he fled, surrendering to Masoods’ Afghan rebel forces. He was locked up for a year, then began fighting for the rebels where his experience with the Soviet Army was invaluable. He is now a top military adviser to Masood.

For the past eight years Sakharov has made Afghanistan his home, although he sometimes slips into his native Krasnodar for visits. He has converted to Islam, married a local girl, and goes by the new name of Islamuddin. He has been camera shy since a thoughtless journalist pictured him shooting at a Russian MiG, which he downed.

Sakharov has been marked for death by Russia’s security organization.



Nikolai Sakharov

M. Guha

Grundig 2-page spread ad

Grundig 2-page spread ad

evening broadcast at 1230 World Time on 7085 kHz, with a repeat the next morning.

Radio Takhar broadcasts from a small room in a military hutment upon a hill at the center of Taloqan, near the dried-up river of the same name. The transmitter is a modified Russian RX-10 renovated for broadcast use and housed in a small room towards the rear. Powered by a four-kilowatt Russian diesel generator, it has an effective rating of 1 kW and can operate in the frequency range 7000-7085 kHz.

All this hardware appears to have been vandalized from a Soviet military communications truck, which incongruously now acts as an outdoor van and also serves to relocate the transmitter quickly in the event of attack. Another disused Russian military communications tractor-trailer's transmitter, once used as a relay in Badakshan, has been vandalized for spare parts. There are also unconfirmed reports of a similar low-power shortwave repeater at Charikar, not far from the Kabul frontline.

The mainstay transmitter is often off because of technical snags or a lack of parts. Scarcity of diesel for the generator

also forces the transmitter to operate at less than its normal output of 1 kW, making it a prize DX catch.

There is a cooped-up rudimentary studio consisting of a tape deck and a microphone, which injects directly into the transmitter without any equalization. It has distorted audio as the final output, but the signal steadies as the transmitter warms up. But the substandard audio quality listeners endure isn't just because of the transmitter and Spartan studio hardware. Even everyday audio cassettes are hard to come by, so they have to be used and reused until they sound warbled.

Radio Takhar presently broadcasts one hour each morning from 0130 to 0230 World Time around 7 MHz—it was on exactly 7000 kHz when I was there on assignment for PASSPORT. Programs consist of news and commentary in Dari and Pashto, as well as a segment in Uzbek, interwoven with muezzin calls to prayer and lively patriotic music.

Evening broadcasts of Radio Takhar at 1330-1430 World Time have been discontinued because of a lack of power. Instead,

BLOODSHED AS MASS ENTERTAINMENT

Since 1996, Kabul residents have turned to public executions, amputations and floggings as virtually their sole form of entertainment. These Romanesque spectacles are announced over the Voice of Shariah radio Thursday evenings, then carried out on Friday, the Muslim Sabbath.

About 20,000 people crowd into the football stadium to cheer as convicted murderers and rapists are shot dead by victims' relatives. Warmup acts include the flogging of young men who have been caught drinking whisky.

In the southern city of Kandahar the Taliban leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, recently attended what the Voice of Shariah called, "a ceremony for the restoration of heavenly order." Three homosexual men were lined up next to a stone wall, which was then pushed over to bury them alive.

Qisas, the right of revenge, has become the norm throughout towns and cities in the two-thirds of Afghanistan under Taliban control. The condemned are executed employing the methods they themselves used. In one particularly gruesome case a killer had his throat slashed by one of his victim's relatives.



Field gun, captured from the Taliban by rebel forces, takes a break from shelling at the Pul-e-Bangi frontline. J. Barbee

there is a fleapower television station which started in May 1999. The staff consists of roughly 90 employees, including an engineer and two technicians working jointly for radio and television operations in morning and evening shifts.

Both Radio Takhar and Kabul's Voice of Shariah deliberately hover around 7080 kHz so that Afghan listeners can be tricked into listening to their station. Since Radio Takhar does not broadcast after dark, the station from Kabul sometimes identifies evenings as "Injá Takhar" in a bid to further confuse unsuspecting listeners.

On some days Kabul jams the morning broadcast. However, no officials in Kabul appear to be monitoring, as they have been jamming Radio Takhar on days when

it was clearly off because of transmitter trouble.

Efforts are underway for Radio Takhar to procure an aging 50 kW shortwave transmitter from India, but the power supply and other difficulties need to be sorted out first, so it's a long shot. But even this is unlikely to be the last salvo in Afghanistan's media war. While military men battle it out along the fronts, the clash of information and disinformation will continue to crackle over the world band airwaves in this politically pivotal nation.

Manosij Guha, formerly news producer for German television, has been on exclusive assignment for PASSPORT throughout the Central Asian region.

REBEL LEADER AHMAD SHAH MASOOD

Rebel leader Ahmad Shah Masood, 53, has been hailed in a French documentary as one of the finest military commanders of the century. Speaking with PASSPORT in a rare one-on-one interview, he states, "It is not possible the problem is solved militarily alone. Pakistan has been isolated. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have stopped supplying money and weapons. Pakistan will not be able to go on much longer. So this year there will be maximum effort from both sides—it will be a year of reckoning."

In adjacent Tajikistan, Masood is a folk hero. Apart from being next of kin, he is credited with brokering the 1994 Tajik peace accord in Kabul.



Ahmad Shah Masood