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Rape of Afghanistan's forests bodes disaster

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by Nick Meo

Before the outbreak of war in 1979, Afghanistan was famous for its unspoiled woodlands filled with wildlife. An unbroken belt of natural pistachio forest stretched across the north, giant 300-year-old cedars filled the mountain valleys of the east, and even the arid hills of the south were well-timbered.

Twenty-five years of war later, the extent of the country's environmental disaster is becoming frighteningly clear.

In 1977 satellite imaging found 55 per cent of Badghis Province was covered with woodlands. Now almost nothing shows up.

Desperate villagers stripped the mountainsides bare of trees to survive and, with no government authority to stop them, warlords found lumbering high-value trees such as walnut and cedar almost as profitable as the drugs trade.

Forestry experts believe the country has suffered an environmental disaster that has hardly been noticed by the outside world but is grimly apparent to villagers who are increasingly seeing their livelihoods destroyed by desertification.

The forests of the north - once famous throughout Asia for the pistachios they produced for export - have almost disappeared.

Sayed Bahram Saeedi, director of forestry at the agricultural ministry, estimates that half of Afghanistan's forestlands have been destroyed during the last 25 years of war and drought. In the east the figure may be higher than 70 per cent.

With government authority non-existent in many areas, the rape of the forests continues unchecked, and may even have been stepped up in the past three years as the end of fighting made it easier for timber mafias to operate.

Along the Pakistan border, huge areas of forest have been levelled. High-quality wood is exported to Pakistan's carpenters, who turn it into furniture for export to the Gulf. The rest is sold as firewood in Afghanistan - the dusty road from the border town of Khost to Kabul is constantly choked with convoys of trucks filled with wood.

In Kunar, a lawless province famous for giant 300-year-old trees, it is not the Taleban but the timber mafias who are blamed by United States troops for the majority of assaults on them. Warlords want to keep out the Afghan Government and its US supporters for fear that logging may be stopped.

Belatedly, some efforts are being made to slow the rate of destruction.

Reforestation projects are starting, such as one to re-plant pistachios - run by Afghan entrepreneurs in Samangan in the north.

American agro-forester Eddie Keturakis said that without tree cover to protect the land, gullies and canyons have been cut into the soil.

"Villagers are desperate to see the forest replaced, even though it takes eight years before pistachio nuts can be harvested," he said. "They cut most of the trees down to sell the wood to survive, and now they recognise what a terrible mistake that was."

A "Green Division" of 300 forest rangers is being trained and armed by the Afghan Government to try to protect what is left. They are to be stationed in the border provinces of Kunar, Paktia and Nuristan with plans to increase them to a force of 2000 by the end of the year.

Few think they will be a match for timber mafias armed with rocket-propelled grenades and machine-guns.

The warlords employ hundreds of men with dozens of chainsaws, bribing local officials to turn a blind eye and relying on giant camel caravans to move the wood over the mountains to Pakistan.

In the lower valleys of Kunar they have stripped mountainsides bare, leaving stumps where magnificent forests once grew.

Faqir Mohammed, a 70-year-old villager in the spectacular Yachina alpine valley, said the trade began about a decade ago when Pakistani merchants arrived with chainsaws. The trade had brought prosperity to his village, he said.

"It used to take a team of men two days to cut a tree with a handsaw," he said. "Now it can be done by one man in an hour with a chainsaw." Villages in the area had clubbed together to build a rough road into the mountains to truck the timber out. The surrounding mountainsides are still well-wooded.

But the old man admitted: "There are fewer trees than there were. I don't think there will be forests here for my great-grandchildren."