Sitting in a bare mud-walled room in an Afghan refugee camp, I listened as a woman opened upon a nightmare world. I saw a girl wearing white dress, a woman told me. "The Taliban came and said to her: 'White is the colour of our flag. You have disowned our flag. So they beat her.'" Another girl told me how the Taliban treated her father with disrespect. A woman who had lived in Pakistan and had a son in the city, she said, had been forced to leave her father at the border. The Taliban had taken her home because they said she had disowned their flag.

In the streets of Kabul, people are passed by in the dark. In the bazaars, women are obliged to wear the burqa, which covers the entire face.

Many of Afghanistan's educated refugees will not return to Pakistan, but will head for the west. It is unlikely they will ever return. The Taliban have driven out the people of Afghanistan and have created a society that is more than twenty years old and has no future.

SCARS OF COLLAPSE

When I first visited the country in the eighties, it was already at war. The people were struggling against a superpower: the Soviet Union. I found a nation of different ethnic groups, with a conservative but tolerant culture. At that time, I didn't realize the extent to which that culture was already being eroded. Between twenty and thirty percent of the population was displaced by war, and even more people killed. The seeds of the collapse of a fragile social system were sown long before the Taliban appeared.

More than a decade later, I jumped at the chance to return to Kabul. I was surprised to see that the city had changed so much. Despite the Taliban's efforts to reconstruct society, there was still a sense of hope. People were starting to rebuild their lives.

And saw the border — illegally and without a visa — the Taliban were once again in control. The streets were empty, with only a few people walking in the dusty streets. The Taliban had taken control, and with it, a sense of hope.

The domestic violence and the hatred that people have for each other. It was a war of words that had forgotten peace.