

... bloodthirsty friends in the north

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in the former Northern Alliance stronghold of Mazar-i-Sharif, they say: in August 1998, the Taliban massacred more than 7,000 people.

Children and old men were locked in sealed containers in the heat and left to suffocate. The killings were said to have been carried out to avenge similar atrocities committed against the Pushtun-dominated Taliban by the Hazara tribe, which supports the Northern Alliance.

For the West, the dangers inherent in joining forces with anti-Taliban guerrillas are amply illustrated by the reputation of General Rashid Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek commander who controls a pocket of land in the north and has become a pivotal figure in the Northern Alliance.

Dostum, who has switched allegiance several times, once punished a soldier who had been caught stealing by tying him to the tracks of a tank. It drove around a courtyard, crushing the body and spattering blood over onlookers.

Having addressed his men late last week, Rakhim was summoned to a meeting of other warlords to discuss military tactics following the latest news from America.

He first washed his hands, feet and face in a goldfish tank in the lee of the mud walls of his compound. Then, with a group of his closest men, who laid down their Kalashnikovs, he knelt down to pray, facing southwest to Mecca.

"We are hoping the US will bomb the Taliban," he said. "But if the Americans think that they will dictate the future of Afghanistan, they are mistaken. We will choose our next leader ourselves. We may be poor but we are good at repelling foreign invasion — just read our history."

Revenge on their minds: two young fighters of the Northern Alliance look south towards Kabul and the other cities they long to retake with American help

... strikes by pushing back the Taliban and liberating Kabul. He claims 400 men loyal to him are living there, waiting for a signal to take up arms. "I hate the Taliban," he told his followers. "They have killed, tortured and raped my people. Now the hour of reckoning is near... any Taliban official I find I will kill with my own hands."

It is on warlords such as Rakhim that the United States and their allies must rely if they are to end Taliban rule and remove the regime's protection from terrorists such as Osama Bin Laden. Rakhim and more than 100 other Northern Alliance commanders with 15,000 men have fought the 60,000-strong Taliban since the early 1990s and their knowledge of Afghanistan's murderous terrain is

indispensable to the West. Few places illustrate the treachery of the landscape better than the front line in the rocky gorge of Gorband, deep in the mountains northwest of Kabul. The dusty track from Jabal-os-Saraj to the gorge is an awesome memorial to Soviet folly in attempting to take the country 22 years ago. It is littered with the mangled, rusted remains of hundreds of Soviet tanks that were literally stopped in their tracks. Armed mujaheddin in small dug-outs guard the road as it winds through the mountains. After a few miles the track halts abruptly: Northern Alliance forces have bombed it to prevent any enemy offensive. All movement beyond this point is on foot. With the agility of goats, a group led by Lieutenant-Colo-

nel Abdul Quayum, a minute man who fought the Soviets, climbed 800ft in 20 minutes. Crouching to avoid being spotted by Taliban positions, they reached a sangar, a remote frontline post gouged into a mountain ridge. There, 10 guerrillas sleep on a blanket next to three grenade launchers. A blackened water boiler, an old lamp and a small radio are the only commodities. The guerrillas survive on rice, bread and the occasional chunk of lamb brought up from the valley. The harsh conditions have helped to make them some of the fiercest fighters in the world. The Taliban were perched on the nearest peak a mile away, out of sight. A shot echoed across the mountain. "There are 30 posts along this front," said Quayum. "In

all, we have 350 men here. The front line has not moved for two years. At night we exchange fire for a while, then it all goes quiet again. "We are a mountain people and we are used to it. I cannot see how any American soldier can come and fight here. It is impossible without us." The men of the Northern Alliance are not well armed. They have only two attack helicopters and no fighter planes; their Soviet-era tanks and

armoured personnel carriers (APCs) break down frequently. But many of these men resisted seven Soviet offensives in the Panjshir valley before taking on the Taliban. "I have fought the Taliban for seven years now. Nobody knows them like us," said Mirzamon, a 34-year-old fighter from Kabul whose APC is decorated with black flags and a portrait of General Ahmed Shah Masood, the Northern Alliance commander killed earlier this month by two

Arab assassins said to have been sent by Bin Laden. "Every single one of us here has lost someone," said Mirzamon, a colonel who has known 11 close relatives die fighting the Taliban. The officer receives less than \$10 a month. Observers fear that if men such as Mirzamon retake Kabul, the suffering they have endured may be reciprocated in massacres and revenge attacks. Look what happened

