

WIRED

WHO CARRIES THE LOAD | CAMPBELL MACDIARMID

The first warning was a sharp crack that punctured the stillness like an exclamation mark.

AT 4240 METERS, URDUKAS CAMP sits on a series of terraces among the looming boulders of a moraine wall. More rocks perch precariously on the mountainside above. Most expeditions stop here on their way up the Baltoro Glacier in the Karakoram Range of Pakistan. It's warmer than the sites on the glacier, but the truly notable feature is the view: on a clear day, you can look out on mountains that jut like jagged teeth over the glacier's tongue. Uli Biaho, Trango Towers, Cathedral Peaks. Names that resonate with mountain lore and forms that evoke a silent awe.

On August 16, 2011, the summits were obscured by a low ceiling of cloud. The mountains, the sky, the glacier—everything was a gunmetal grey. It was early afternoon. A gentle drizzle fell. The trekkers were in their tents. The porters huddled under sheets of plastic or in whatever dry spots they could find. Eight of them sheltered under a large boulder. The stone was the size of a house, but at some point in the past, it had split in two. One half leaned way out, creating an overhang, cantilevered in place by the weight of the other half and by a few smaller boulders wedged underneath.

A dozen trekkers sat in a mess tent playing cards. It was their first rest day, and the loud crack jolted them from their post-lunch torpor. This was something different than the familiar Baltoro noise of distant rockfall, avalanches and glacial grumblings. It was ominously close. The sound was followed almost immediately by a second crack. The trekkers rushed to the door just in time to see the rock above the eight porters slowly tip, and then tumble down the slope. "Then it picked up momentum and tore off down the mountainside," one trekker, Jeff Dungen, says. "It was a home-sized boulder ripping down the mountain ejecting rocks and people."

Another trekker, Kim Carter-Brown,



likens the boulder to a small truck "making its way in slow motion down the hill, rolling end over end. I recall seeing faces underneath this rock, and you just watched it go down."

MUCH OF THE CURRENT writing about mountain workers in the Karakoram focuses on the experiences of Sherpa and Pakistani high-altitude support crews on commercial and quasi-commercial teams. Sherpa heroes have appeared on the covers of major magazines. Recent books like Amanda Padoan and Peter Zuckerman's *Buried in the Sky* (2012) have examined 8000-meter climbing from the perspective of indigenous high-altitude workers and guides. Since the 1970s, some Pakistani high-altitude staff have gone on from expedition work to become internationally respected climbers, such as Nazir Sabir, who made the first ascent of the West Ridge of K2 in 1981.

At the same time, low-altitude porters—who carry an expedition's supplies to base camp—have remained as dim outlines in most published mountaineering stories. When mentioned, they generally appear as anonymous

processions of men trudging up valley and glacier, occasionally halting approach marches with strikes.

It's easy to forget that the majority of Karakoram visitors still rely on low-altitude porters. Even alpine-style climbers hire them to ferry loads from the road's end to the start of cutting-edge objectives on peaks like Great Trango Tower and Latok I. American alpinist Kelly Cordes explains, "If you're doing technical routes, given the equipment and supplies you need to bring to base camp, and the amount of time you spend there, it's hard to imagine getting by without porters." Rehmat Ali, a porter coordinator for Nazir Sabir Expeditions, describes them as the "umbilical cord" of nearly all Karakoram climbs (*Buried in the Sky*).

Likewise, the porters and their families now depend on the revenue. Many come from remote villages in the Hushe, Shigar and Braldu valleys of the Baltistan region—areas with short growing seasons and long winters, where traditional farming provides only a bare subsistence. Porterage offers one of the few alternative forms of income, helping



villagers send their children to school, buy staples during food shortages, and plant cash crops, such as fruit and potatoes.

Balti men have carried foreigners' loads for more than 100 years. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, portering was mainly a form of obligatory labor, instituted by colonial or feudal rulers to enable travel across the region's vast, roadless terrain. After 1947, when Pakistan became independent, porters continued to work for visiting expeditions. Then in 1963 the government closed the range to foreigners because of the conflict in Kashmir. A decade later, American alpinists and Pakistani businessmen began discussing how mountain tourism might assist Baltistan's struggling economy (Steve Swenson, "K2," *Alpinist* 38). By 1975, they'd succeeded in reopening the Karakoram. Gradually, international and Pakistani companies started hiring and managing porters for treks and climbs, and an adventure travel industry developed.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the number of visitors dropped precipitously. According to Jasmine Tours, their business declined between 40 and 60 percent. Naiknam Karim, the managing director of Adventure Tours Pakistan, says some porters dealt with the loss of income by buying food on credit; others looked for work in cities or the Middle East. Since 2008, the Alpine Club of Pakistan has tried to make the country more appealing to foreign climbers, persuading the government to reduce peak fees. In recent years,

trekking and mountaineering have helped to keep the fickle tourism industry afloat and to mitigate the region's poverty, offering jobs to thousands of porters each season.

WHEN AVAILABLE, portering is hard and dangerous work. Most porters bear more-than-twenty-two-kilo loads on wooden or steel frames with straps made from bits of rope or webbing. Porters usually walk in cheap sandals or plastic shoes, dressed in cotton *shalwar kameez* with old jerseys or jackets for when it gets cold. They frequently subsist on a diet of black tea and chapattis. In the evenings, porters make do with whatever shelter is at hand, typically constructing low stone huts with ceilings of plastic. Lying on thin mats, with blankets or old sleeping bags, they huddle for warmth. Often, they wake in the night to beat off the falling snow that threatens to collapse the roofs.

Muhammad Hussain Balti first worked for a trekking group at age fourteen. Twelve years later, he mostly remembers the cold of the heights, how intense it felt without warm gloves or boots. Porters also struggle with the separation from their families. "This is the hardest part, to be away for so long," says Ghulam Nabi, a guide for Snowland Treks and Tours.

Beyond such difficulties, there are serious risks. Base camps can be distant from the nearest village. Merely getting to the start of climbing routes can require crossing swift-flowing rivers, hiking over crevassed glaciers and traversing unstable terrain above 4000 meters. Near the upper Baltoro, as supplies are used up, a few porters may be sent home early—sometimes without the necessary equipment or training for rescues if one of them falls into a crevasse.

University of Toronto professor Kenneth MacDonald has studied Balti portering communities since the 1980s. He says there are no reliable figures for how many porters die because of their work: "Many injuries that contribute to death go unreported." Zahid Hussain Rajput, a guide who volunteers for the porter advocacy NGO Khurpa Care, estimates that two or three porters are killed in accidents each season. At least four men died in 2012.

"Both in the short term and in the long term, it's a hazardous occupation," MacDonald says. "The long-term effects are invisible to us: corneal ulcers aggravated from the glare off the ice; chronic joint problems, hernias.... Hard labor at high altitudes with inadequate nutrition exacerbates existing conditions and

contributes to the development of chronic health problems."

A few clients assume that porters are somehow better adapted to harsh conditions or that they don't experience suffering the same way that Westerners do. "But they're born to do it" is one refrain. Or: "Listen to the way they sing at night. They're happy."

"They are singing about love," Nabi says.

ON ITS WAY DOWN the mountain, the boulder smashed through the empty tent of a second group of trekkers. Everyone at Urdukas rushed to survey the damage. The trekkers quickly ascertained that the members of their parties were unharmed. It took longer to account for the porters. "We didn't know them all," Dungen says. "But when we heard the porters crying we knew that some of them had died."

Eventually, two bodies were found on the glacier. Another corpse was partly buried near where the rock had fallen. All three men were from the village of Thorgu in the Shigar district: Muhammad Hussain, Muhammad Akbar and Muhammad Inayat. Four other porters suffered injuries. Most wounded porters are expected to make it off the glacier on foot or by horseback. This time, at the tour agency's urging, the chief minister of Gilgit-Baltistan approved a humanitarian evacuation. Meanwhile, several trekkers who had medical training performed emergency care. At 11 a.m. the next day, a Pakistan Army helicopter arrived to carry the injured and the dead.

"The Westerners were really annoyed it took so long to arrive," Carter-Brown says. "The porters were amazed it came at all."

ALL TRAVELERS through the Karakoram Range face objective hazards. It was only by chance that some of the trekkers didn't die in the Urdukas rockfall. Yet although trekkers and climbers choose to take certain risks, many porters say they wouldn't work on expeditions if they had other opportunities, and they hope their sons won't end up in the same occupation. For now, portering often seems like a means to work toward a better future for their families.

Porters currently earn about three times the daily minimum wage in Pakistan (ca. \$3). The Gilgit-Baltistan Council Secretariat sets certain rules that govern their jobs and pay. The routes are divided into fixed stages. If a porter covers two in a day, the normal distance, he will get about \$10. There is a maximum load limit of twenty-five kilos (less than what



porters carry in Nepal). Expeditions must provide basic supplies such as flour, ghee, dal, tea, milk, meat, sugar, salt, fuel, stoves, shoes, socks, sunglasses and some kind of rain gear.

But since porters have the option of receiving a food and equipment allowance instead, most choose to take the extra money, eat frugally, and make do with what they have. Some prefer to sell the gear rather than use it. “If you don’t scratch the sunglasses, you can get 100 rupees [ca. \$1],” the porter Shujaat Shigri told the authors of *Buried in the Sky*. “That’s a lot of money.” Muhammad Hussain Balti, who now runs the adventure travel business K2 Winners with Hassan Sadpara, argues that the gear allowance (ca. \$6) isn’t enough for sturdy footwear. He says he has lobbied to increase the amount that companies have to spend.

The regulations also require porters to carry life insurance, which clients usually purchase as part of their expedition package. Yet Syed Amir

Raza, the general manager of Alpha Insurance, reports that some tour companies fail to submit the porters’ applications. While the three men who died at Urdukas were insured, their relatives had to go through a lengthy process to receive the benefits—only about \$1,100 each. They were fortunate to be paid at all, Rajput notes. The fine print excludes altitude sickness and unwitnessed accidents. At times, porters are the only wage earners in their families. If they die or become disabled, their children or elderly parents can end up destitute.

During the summer, a porter might make three or more trips. “A very hard worker,” Rajput says, “might get \$600.” Roland Hunter, a British guide with the UK-based Mountain Company, estimates as much as \$1,000, taking tips into account. Since 2007, Khurpa Care has worked to improve conflict resolution between porters and employers, making sure that porters’ voices are heard in tourist department

meetings. As a result, reports of strikes, once common, have diminished. Khurpa Care has also secured an annual increase in wages. A few Balti porters have opened shops and tea stalls or even started their own trekking companies. Some find work in cities between seasons, often in low-wage restaurant, hotel or service jobs. Others still rely on portering as their main cash source, and they have trouble saving any of it.

On the other hand, some of the smaller Pakistani companies are also struggling to stay in business in the post-9/11 age. Many in the industry say they fear that raising wages and prices too high could drive tourists to cheaper destinations in India or Nepal—shutting down some local tour agencies and eliminating their porters’ jobs. Since 2004, Cordes has made four trips to the range, including the first ascent of the Azeem Ridge. “If [Pakistan’s] economy was such that everything were

[Opening Page] Three porters between Askole and the Baltoro Glacier, Pakistan. | [Facing Page] Trekkers and porters on the way to K2 Base Camp. Unlike the approaches to many climbs in Nepal, this area has no nearby villages for expeditions to re-supply. | [This Page]

Urdukas camp, above the Baltoro Glacier. A few days later, the split boulder in the background fell and killed three porters. Trekkers provided emergency medical care to the survivors and donated money to the families of those who died. Campbell MacDiarmid (all)



Two porters on the Baltoro Glacier. Lieutenant Colonel Manzoor Hussain (Rtd.), President of the Alpine Club of Pakistan (ACP), writes, "Porter welfare cannot be ignored or denied.... ACP is of the view that porter registration must be undertaken in the concerned valleys so they can be well organized in groups for managing their welfare." Campbell MacDiarmid

American prices," he says, "we couldn't go on the trip to begin with. Granted, that's a long ways off—Pakistan is still a great deal for us."

To protect porters' jobs, government regulations forbid outfitters from relying on pack animals. But the military is allowed to use them to ferry loads to remote outposts, and some companies resort to them during the peak season when there are porter shortages. Heavily laden and less sure-footed than humans, animals are more likely to get injured. Already, the Baltoro Glacier is littered with the corpses of dozens of horses, donkeys and mules.

DURING THE SAME YEAR as the Urdukas incident, Khurpa Care conducted a survey of seventy porters on the Baltoro Glacier. Seventy-five percent listed inadequate shelter as the most serious grievance. The thin plastic sheets given by the companies, the porters reported, can break after only one night. They asked for thicker tarps to use as ground cloths and roofs. They also wanted life insurance that covered deaths from illnesses sustained during a trek.

Most low-altitude porters speak little English. They seldom complain to foreigners, particularly while working, for fear of jeopardizing their employment. Some companies do a good job of following the regulations; others fail to abide by them. Clients may not be aware of problems, Rajput says, especially if they are "just thinking of their expedition." Kamal Hussain, owner of Snowland Treks and Tours, explains that the intense competition between outfitters has been mostly based on

price: only about 5 percent of his prospective clients ever ask about porter welfare. If more agencies knew that travelers cared, they might realize that providing porters with better food, medical care, shelter and gear could enhance their companies' reputation and attract more business. Hunter agrees, "Asking questions, that changes things." The Mountain Company considers the cost of loaning boots and jackets to porters (in addition to paying the allowance) as partly a marketing expense. Several other companies have likewise started lending equipment at the start of treks, thus ensuring that their porters have what they need on the glacier.

A few organizations like Khurpa Care now train Balti porters in safer glacier travel, crevasse rescue, risk assessment and first aid. In addition, they teach climbing to both men and women so they can get better-paying jobs as guides. This January, two members of Khurpa Care attended the Khumbu Climbing School in Nepal. To help make portering more professionalized and less anonymous, Khurpa Care is also creating a registry of porters throughout Baltistan, assembling representatives from each village who can communicate local issues and concerns to government and tourism officials. Many porters hope eventually to use the cash they earn to escape a long history of difficult physical labor and poverty. "They want to save up money," Rajput explains, "and before they become old, they want to leave this hard job." He'd like to offer small loans to enable older workers to enter less-arduous careers. Currently, however, Khurpa Care has an all-volunteer staff

and little funding. Muhammad Hussain Balti argues that it's hard to interest donors in programs for low-altitude porters—who might still seem like part of the background.

In some ways, these men's experiences appear as half-visible in modern adventure media as they were in most nineteenth-century tales. Yet, today, their own mountain journeys represent a heroic struggle to improve their families' lives. Porterage provides essential income for Balti communities. By becoming more cognizant of the human context of treks and climbs, visitors can turn their travel into something more beneficial, equitable and safe for these local people. Cordes verifies that the outfitters he hires pay at least the regulation wage. New Zealand alpinist Pat Deavoll insists on seeing documentation that porters are insured, and she makes sure everyone gets enough food. Paul Charlton, an American climber who volunteers for Khurpa Care, urges alpinists to be sure that porters have (and use) appropriate gear, particularly on exposed terrain, and to check that porters aren't sent back alone across crevasse-ridden glaciers.

In these mountains, however, progress can seem geologically slow, each small gain deposited on top of what came before. A year after the deaths at Urdukas, most companies began issuing tarps to porters for shelter, rather than mere plastic sheets.

AT FIFTY, Mohammad Hussein is old for a porter. He sits above Urdukas with his back against a sun-warmed slab and traces his age in the dust. In a few years, he will be passed over for younger, fitter men. Decades in the mountains have wrinkled and burnished his face. A bump on his forehead attests to a lifetime of habitual prayer: five times a day he touches his head to the ground. A reedy laugh punctuates his speech, as does a persistent, ragged cough.

Hussein has two sons and seven daughters, only one of whom is married. Porterage is the sole way he can support them. When he was younger, he hoped to become a guide, or at least a sirdar. Then he injured his knee and had to hobble three days to the nearest village for surgery. After a long absence, he returned to work, but he was never promoted. He shrugs when asked about the dangers. As the shadows rise from the valley, he points out the peaks that draw men and women from far away. The alpenglow turns a deep orange just before it fades. He's silent for a while. Then he says, "The mountains are our mother." ■