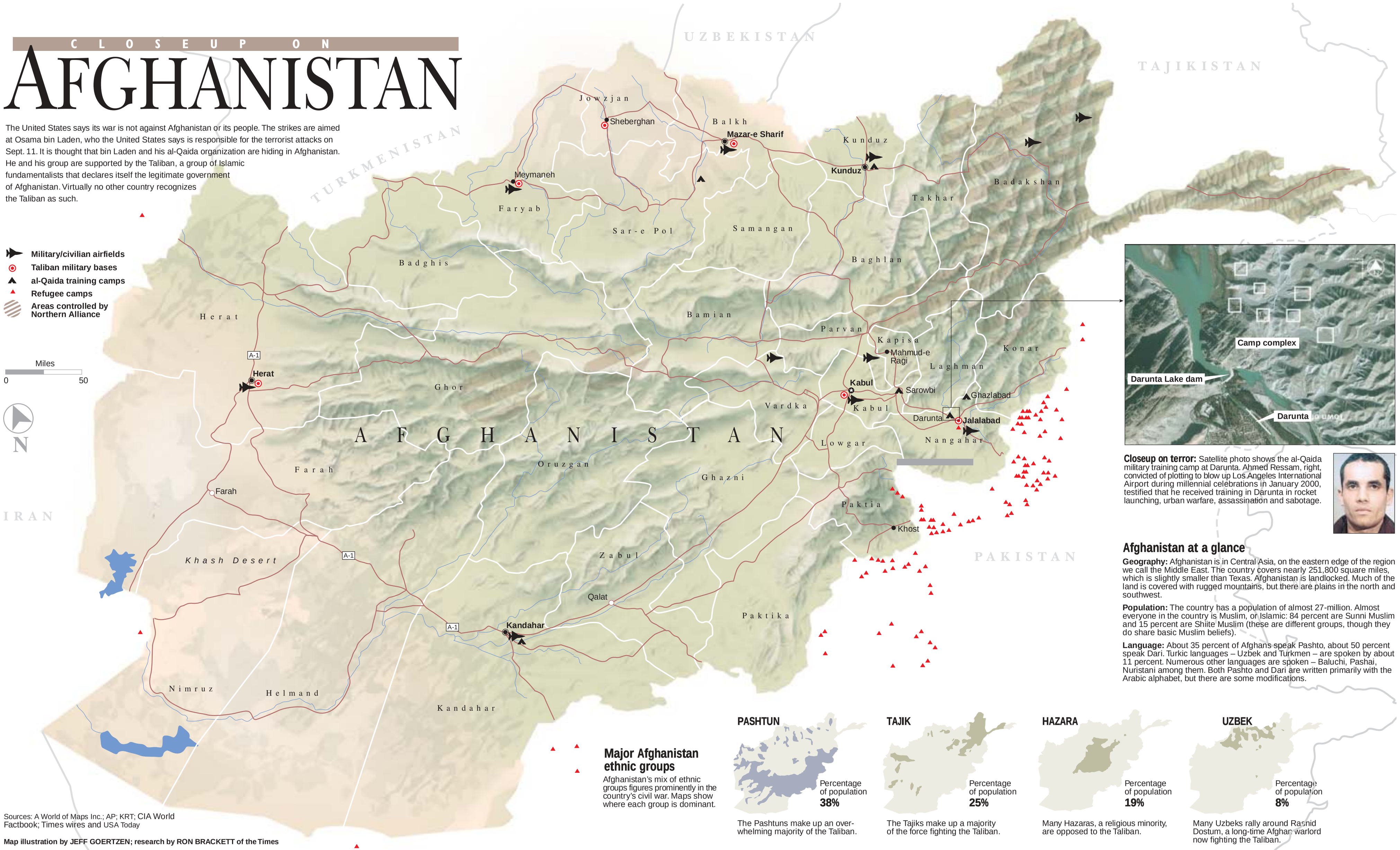
CLOSEUP ON

AFGHANISTAN

The United States says its war is not against Afghanistan or its people. The strikes are aimed at Osama bin Laden, who the United States says is responsible for the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11. It is thought that bin Laden and his al-Qaida organization are hiding in Afghanistan. He and his group are supported by the Taliban, a group of Islamic fundamentalists that declares itself the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Virtually no other country recognizes the Taliban as such.



Closeup on terror: Satellite photo shows the al-Qaida military training camp at Darunta. Ahmed Ressam, right, convicted of plotting to blow up Los Angeles International Airport during millennial celebrations in January 2000, testified that he received training in Darunta in rocket launching, urban warfare, assassination and sabotage.

Afghanistan at a glance

Geography: Afghanistan is in Central Asia, on the eastern edge of the region we call the Middle East. The country covers nearly 251,800 square miles, which is slightly smaller than Texas. Afghanistan is landlocked. Much of the land is covered with rugged mountains, but there are plains in the north and southwest.

Population: The country has a population of almost 27-million. Almost everyone in the country is Muslim, or Islamic: 84 percent are Sunni Muslim and 15 percent are Shiite Muslim (these are different groups, though they do share basic Muslim beliefs).

Language: About 35 percent of Afghans speak Pashto, about 50 percent speak Dari. Turkic languages – Uzbek and Turkmen – are spoken by about 11 percent. Numerous other languages are spoken – Baluchi, Pashai, Nuristani among them. Both Pashto and Dari are written primarily with the Arabic alphabet, but there are some modifications.

Major Afghanistan ethnic groups

Afghanistan's mix of ethnic groups figures prominently in the country's civil war. Maps show where each group is dominant.

PASHTUN

Percentage of population **38%**

The Pashtuns make up an overwhelming majority of the Taliban.

TAJIK

Percentage of population **25%**

The Tajiks make up a majority of the force fighting the Taliban.

HAZARA

Percentage of population **19%**

Many Hazaras, a religious minority, are opposed to the Taliban.

UZBEK

Percentage of population **8%**

Many Uzbeks rally around Rasnid Dostum, a long-time Afghan warlord now fighting the Taliban.

Sources: A World of Maps Inc.; AP; KRT; CIA World Factbook; Times wires and USA Today

Map illustration by JEFF GOERTZEN; research by RON BRACKETT of the Times