The extent of the poverty and desperation in Afghanistan left me lost for words.

(An article in the Daily Telegraph, October 13th 2022, by Joe Wallen, Southeast Asia Correspondent)

It is over one year since the Taliban officially returned to power in Afghanistan. At the very least, it was supposed to bring an end to the violence here.

But just last week, an Islamic State suicide bomber detonated himself in an education centre in western Kabul, killing at least 43 people, largely teenage girls from Afghanistan’s Hazara Shia Muslim minority.

As we drove from the airport to our Kabul safe house, the anxiety in the city was palpable. Every couple of hundred metres, Taliban soldiers, armed to the teeth, flagged down our vehicle and aggressively enquired as to our purpose in the city.

The only other people in the streets were starving women and children who swarmed around the Telegraph’s vehicle every time it came to a halt.

More that 90% of Afghans are suffering from some form of food insecurity, according to Human Rights Watch.

While driving down Flower Street – named for the hawkers who once sold bouquets to Kabul’s residents here, a wafer-thin boy, no older than five-years-old, attempted to hold onto our car door while we were moving.

Our Afghan fixer explained it was a desperate new tactic to force motorists to stop and give money or food.

Then there were the burqa-clad widows who lay motionless on street corners in Kabul. The Taliban has banned women from working and they have absolutely no way to feed their families.

I have reported across South Asia for almost four years now but this was my first visit to Afghanistan. The extent of the poverty and desperation left me lost for words.

On our fourth day in Kabul, we were informed by the Taliban that our application for press accreditation had been rejected. We would have to leave.

I am not the first person this has happened to, suggesting a policy change is underway towards foreign correspondents.

It is a mistake – without independent reporting here, the plight of Afghans risks being forgotten completely.

At the airport departure gate, we were reminded again of the lives being pulled apart by the total economic collapse here.

A Hazara woman was sobbing as she held her eldest daughter tight in her arms, not wanting to let go. The family had pooled together their remaining savings to send their three children to neighbouring Iran, fearing for their safety.

“Go, go, go”, the mother eventually relented. She gave a weak smile, as tears poured down her face – no idea when she would see her children again.