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The Tragedy Of Afghanistan

2001

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Afghanistan is a tragic country. The Soviet-backed coup and subsequent invasion in 1979 ushered in more than two decades of brutal war. During the 1980's, the US supplied at least USD 32 billion¹ of military aid to the mujahadeen, the Islamic opposition to the Soviet regime. The US explicitly channelled their funding to the most fanatical and violent islamists in an attempt to cause the maximum damage to the Russians.

When the Soviets withdrew in 1989, the Western states turned their attention away from this barren wasteland. While the US had been willing to pump billions of dollars of weapons into the country, their concern for the oppressed population did not extend to the same generosity in funding reconstruction. The UNHCR's budget for Afghanistan in 1999 – as part of the Common UN Appeal for Afghanistan – was \$17 million². The decade after the Soviet retreat was dominated by constant war as the heavily armed warlords fought it out for the meagre resources of this forgotten land.

During the past 20 years about 2.5 million Afghans have died as a direct or indirect result of the war – army assaults, famine or lack of medical attention³. This makes up over 10% of the population or one death every 5 minutes. Those who have survived have often been maimed by bombs and landmines. A sign at the Dogharoon border post reads: “every 24 hours 7 people step on mines in Afghanistan”. UN estimates in 2000 put the average life expectancy of Afghans at 41, and since then this has undoubtedly sharply declined. Afghan children have one chance in five of dying before their second birthday. Increasing repression has accompanied the slaughter, and women in particular have found themselves even further excluded from public life and locked in the prison of the home by the fundamentalist ideology of the ‘holy warriors.’

Refuge

According to UN statistics the number of Afghan refugees living in Iran and Pakistan is 6.3 million⁴ or one refugee every minute over 20 years. These people have fled despite the fact that all they can look forward to is a life of misery in one of the squalid and hopeless camps across the border. So during this period of war some 10% of the population has been killed and 30% have been forced into exile,

¹ The menace of Islamic fundamentalism and the hypocrisy of imperialism Lal Khan Pakistan, October 2000 www.marxist.com

² UNHCR report on Afghanistan march 1999: www.unhcr.ch

³ UN report quoted by Iranian film-maker Mohsen Makhmalbaf June 20, 2001 The Iranian www.iranian.com

⁴ Ibid.

a tragedy on a monumental scale and one that has been almost totally ignored by the West.

In the last year the harsh situation has become dramatically worse. The worst drought in 30 years has seen the virtual extermination of the country's only productive resort – their livestock. Famine and starvation are sweeping through the land.

The UNHCR estimates that there are at least one million Afghans starving to death at the moment⁵. Now even the last chances of survival for many of these appear to have disappeared as the neighbouring countries are refusing entry to refugees and deporting 'illegal' immigrants. The Iranian filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf is one of the rare outsiders who has taken an interest in this disaster zone: "I witnessed about 20,000 men, women and children around the city of Herat starving to death. They couldn't walk and were scattered on the ground awaiting the inevitable. . . In Dushanbeh in Tajikistan I saw a scene where 100,000 Afghans were running from south to north, on foot. It looked like doomsday. These scenes are never shown in the media anywhere in the world. The war-stricken and hungry children had run for miles and miles barefoot. Later on the same fleeing crowd was attacked by internal enemies and was also refused asylum in Tajikistan. In the thousands, they died and died in a no-man's land between Afghanistan and Tajikistan and neither you found out nor anybody else"⁶. Afghanistan is fast becoming a vast extermination camp, with armed guards on all the exits so that nobody can escape.

The Taliban

The Taliban leaders were formed in Islamic religious schools while refugees in Pakistan, and have continued to recruit students to these schools based mainly upon the fact that they offer bread and the only education available to the hungry masses. If the 'civilised' world had spent a tiny fraction of the billions of military funding on providing food and rational education to these victims, it is very unlikely that the Taliban would ever have existed as a serious force. Instead they channelled funds through Saudi Arabia and aid organisations such as USAID⁷, into these religious schools (although they would more accurately be described as political training camps for a movement based upon hatred and fanaticism).

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Helga Baitenmann, "NGOs and the Afghan War: The Politicisation of Humanitarian Aid", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 12 (1990), pp. 1–23

However, they flourished and as they progressively took over between 1994 and 1998, they were generally accepted by the populace, at least among their fellow Pashtuns, who saw in them the most realistic hope of security, albeit at the expense of freedom. The dead have little freedom anyway. They were formed explicitly as a reaction to the rule of warlords, a return to 'pure,' unifying religion⁸. They were well organised, relatively free from complicity in most of the hated warfare and drug trading of the previous 15 years and were relatively well educated in this country where rural illiteracy runs as high as 90%.

However, while the Taliban's harsh regime initially appeared capable of offering some hope of security and stability, Afghans quickly learned that they could expect more of the same brutality. The Taliban forces indulged in massacres in the towns which 'welcomed them' (the euphemism which they use to describe their conquests of opposition towns). In 1998 the Iranian consular staff was among the thousands of people massacred after the fall of Mazar-i Sharif to the Taliban. They come from Afghanistan's largest tribes, the Pashtun who make up about 35% of the population. They have been accused of brutally imposing their harsh religious laws on other tribes, but it is women who have suffered most at the hands of their horrific religious regime.

While they may have largely failed in their promise to provide security and peace, their failure to provide food and work for the population is at least as important. The Taliban have, like all governments, concentrated primarily on supplying their own forces. So now during this time of mass famine they are the only people with food and resources. The fundamentalists' blatant attacks on women and individual liberties might have been tolerated by the people of this traditionally patriarchal and strictly religious society, if they were able to provide bread and safety. However, there were no solutions to these problems in the Taliban's religious code, and their abject failure to even address the economic problems of the people cost them any real support amongst Afghans. As the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan state: "The people of Afghanistan have nothing to do with Osama and his accomplices [they] have no plans for socio-economic reconstruction. Nor do they have a decent concept for the country"⁹. The Taliban have constantly faced serious opposition in Afghanistan, especially from the marginalised non-Pashtun peoples. However, a people devastated by 20 years of extreme suffering and starvation have hardly the capacity to mount effective opposition to this band of heavily armed and ruthless soldiers. For there to be any hope of replacing them, there would have to be a massive flow of resources to the impoverished Afghans. If they were supplied with food, education, health and

⁸ UNHCR report quoted on Afghanistan 1998 www.unhcr.ch

⁹ Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan at rawasongs.fancymarketing.net

civil infrastructure, they would not tolerate long the burden of Taliban misrule. However, this course of action, which would actually damage the men of violence, is not even remotely considered by the US warlords. Instead they propose a storm of death and destruction against the very people who are, in the words of Afghan-American Tamir Ansay, “the first victims of the Taliban”¹⁰.

A war of the rich states against Afghanistan will inevitably lead to the deaths of millions of Afghans who have as little responsibility for the Taliban’s or Bin Laden’s acts as the workers of the World Trade Centre had for the much greater crimes of the US government. The first demands of the US included an order for Pakistan to stop food aid from crossing into Afghanistan¹¹ – essentially a call for mass murder on a scale that dwarfs the bombings in the US. War against Afghanistan will especially hit those who are already the gravest victims of the ‘fundamentalists.’ The only people with the facilities to evade the West’s weapons of mass destruction, especially starvation, are the Taliban soldiers and it is them and the fundamentalists like Bin Laden who are most likely to gain in strength with every bomb that falls on this shattered country.

The idea of the richest states in the world going to war against the most destitute and helpless is monstrous. If you feel that innocent people shouldn’t be slaughtered then you must oppose this barbaric war, or become complicit in another of the great crimes against humanity perpetrated in the name of Western ‘civilisation’ in the few tragic centuries of capitalist global expansion.

¹⁰ See article at www.salon.com

¹¹ Noam Chomsky in interview with Belgrade radio B92 at: www.struggle.ws

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