

Disaster in Afghanistan

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Global Research, September 09, 2008

9 September 2008

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

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It is difficult to find out what is really going on in Afghanistan. The focus of the mass media is almost entirely on the military activities of the Canadian and NATO forces. There is absolutely no coverage of political developments. The news on the economy is limited to the state of the poppy industry. This is no accident. The North American media, including the CBC, has strongly supported the U.S./NATO strategy and the administration of President Hamid Karzai. Contrary to the mainstream message, things are not going well.

Rise in civilian casualties

Over the past few weeks NATO forces have killed civilians in a number of incidents, and popular opposition to the western military effort is increasing. On August 22 the United States bombed the village of Azizabad in Herat province; the result was the death of 91 civilians, including over 60 children. Rockets and missiles were also used. Many homes were destroyed. Local citizens stoned the Afghan army when they tried to distribute supplies. NATO forces in Paktika province launched an artillery attack on a village on September 1 as part of a general sweep-and-destroy mission against Taliban forces. Three children were killed and seven injured. That same day U.S. and Afghan forces carried out an overnight raid in Hud Kheil, east of Kabul. A family of four, including two children, were killed when hand grenades were thrown into their house. In Kabul hundreds blocked the main road out of town protesting the military practices of the international forces.

Afghan government and NATO attacks In response to the steady increase of civilian deaths this year, the Afghan parliament passed a resolution in August calling on the Karzai administration to negotiate a new status-of-forces agreement with NATO and United States, making it consistent with Afghan and international law. President Karzai's cabinet demanded "an end to air attacks in civilian areas, illegal detentions and unilateral house searches." There is growing opposition to the presence of the occupying forces. The Senlis Council reported in June 2008 that in their most recent recent public opinion survey "more than six out of ten of those interviewed ... said that foreign troops should leave." This is the position taken by many of the democratic parties in Afghanistan. Malalai Joya, the outspoken critic of the Karzai government, has called for all foreign troops to leave the country. She argues that Afghans can settle this dispute better on their own.

The approaching famine

However, the most important current issue in Afghanistan is the drought, the crop failure, and the prospect of famine. This story has received no coverage in the North American media. Over the last winter Afghanistan received well-below normal rainfall and mountain snow pack. The spring runoff was light, and crop yields from irrigated agriculture have been significantly reduced. There are conditions of drought throughout the country. In many

areas there are no crops and livestock has perished from lack of pasture. Wheat provides the staple food, and production is 60 percent below average. Recent rains have brought flooding, as the land has been hardened by the drought. Floods are more common because over the past few decades 60% of the woodland has been removed by the population seeking fuel for cooking and winter heating. The jump in fuel prices has raised the cost of the delivery of food from neighbouring countries. Food prices are rising. The price of a 50 kg bag of wheat flour is now \$35. One half of the population in Afghanistan lives on less than \$2 per day. The government of Afghanistan reports that 42% of the population lives in "extreme poverty", defined as a per capita income of less than \$120 per year. The United Nations Mission in Afghanistan reported in August that "at least four million most vulnerable people have already been pushed into the 'high-risk food-insecurity' category." Children are the most vulnerable. One in five children die before the age of five, mainly due to malnutrition. In response, the United Nations and other food agencies have called for an emergency fund of \$404 million in order to purchase food. To date less than 20% has been forthcoming from donor countries.

What is happening to women's rights?

Supporters of the U.S. project in Afghanistan always point to how many girls are now going to school. But as Ann Jones points out, the number cited (5 million) is fewer than half the children of school age. In Kabul 85% are in school; in the Pashtun south, less than 20% and "near zero for girls." Radio Free Afghanistan's Jan Alekozai recently toured eastern Afghanistan. He noted that there were schools but no teachers, no chairs and tables, no electricity or water, no books, and no labs. "The participation of women is zero in the provinces," he argued. While some are going to school "they cannot walk, for example, in a park - or with their families." In February 2008 Womankind Worldwide (UK) released a survey of the status of women in Afghanistan. They found that 87% of Afghan women report domestic violence, 60% of all marriages are still forced, and 57% of all recent marriages involved girls under the age of sixteen, which is contrary to the law. Ann Jones, who spent a number of years in Afghanistan working for women's rights, is not surprised. President Karzai's wife is a qualified gynecologist but does not practice her skills. She remains locked up in the presidential fortress, the Arg, and is not seen by the general public. Since the onset of the 20th century, she is the first wife of a state leader who has not publicly championed women's rights.

Change of regime in Afghanistan

Few Canadians would know that there is a presidential election scheduled for Afghanistan in 2009. Hamid Karzai has announced that he will run again. After his tour of eastern Afghanistan, Jan Alekozai reported strong opposition to the local warlords and the Karzai government. He judged that Karzai would have a hard time getting 20% of the votes in the 2009 election. The people blame the Americans and NATO for the increase in the power of the warlords. The main opposition to Karzai will come from the United National Front, which is largely a coalition of the warlords and Islamist leaders based in the parliament. They have demanded a change in the constitution to bring in a parliamentary system of government with political parties and elections by proportional representation. The Front is dominated by the Islamist forces from the Northern Alliance. The Front has called for a new international meeting to settle the ongoing civil war in Afghanistan. This would be hosted by the United Nations and include all neighbouring states as well as representation from Afghanistan's political groups, including the armed opposition. In late August Fazel Sangcharaki, speaking

for the Front, stated that many foreign envoys have supported this proposal. But the problem is the opposition of the U.S. government.

Canadian government stresses militarism

The policy of the Canadian government since 2001 has been to put the highest priority on its military role in Afghanistan. In support of the Afghan “war on terrorism”, the Canadian government has been spending around \$1 billion per year on the military and only \$100 million on humanitarian assistance and economic development. Much of the military budget has been spent on acquiring new military hardware, needed for counter-insurgency warfare.. Just before Stephen Harper forced a fall election, polls emerged which showed that Canadians remain skeptical of the role in Afghanistan. A poll by Ipsos Reid for the Department of National Defence revealed that the majority of Canadians still want Canada to emphasize peacekeeping. A CBC poll done by Environics reported that 56% of Canadians disapprove of Canada’s military role in Afghanistan. Since the March 2008 agreement by the Conservatives and Liberals to extend Canada’s mission to 2011, Afghanistan has largely disappeared from political discussion. The challenge for Canadians is to make this disastrous war in Afghanistan an issue in the current election.

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