

Afghanistan, Six Years On by Gabriel Carlyle (Voices UK) Peace News, October 2007. No 2490. www.peacenews.info.

On 7 October 2001 US and British forces invaded Afghanistan, killing thousands of civilians. But following the Taliban's "defeat" in December 2001, Afghanistan dropped out of the media, and off the anti-war movement's agenda.

Six years later, despite the mounting carnage, Afghanistan remains the establishment's "good war" [1], which even *The Independent* cannot bring itself to oppose [2]. Here is some of the reality behind the spin.

1. War was not the only option in 2001.

The US and Britain chose to invade Afghanistan in spite of Taliban offers to extradite bin Laden [3], and dire warnings from the international aid agencies regarding the likely humanitarian impact.

Over 2,000 civilians were killed directly by US/UK forces during the invasion itself [4]. Indirect deaths - as the bombing disrupted vital aid supplies and forced hundreds of thousands to flee their homes - were later estimated at between 10,000 - 20,000 [5].

2. Following the 2001 invasion, militias with horrific human rights records were 'brought to power with the assistance of the United States' (Human Rights Watch), and the political process was manipulated by the US in order to install a weak leader (Hamid Karzai), who was dependent upon foreign backing and the appeasement of these warlords [6].

In the 2004 Presidential elections voters in many rural areas were told by warlords and regional commanders how to vote [7], while during the campaign period for the September 2005 parliamentary elections, Human Rights Watch 'documented pervasive intimidation of voters and candidates, in particular women' [8]. Over half of the members of the Afghan parliament are linked to armed groups or have records of past human rights abuses [9].

3. Six years after the war to "liberate" them '[v]iolence against [Afghan] women remains endemic, with few avenues for redress' (Human Rights Watch, World Report 2007).

A 2003 report by Amnesty International even noted that, 'In some parts of Afghanistan, women have stated that the insecurity and the risk of sexual violence they face make their lives worse than during the Taliban era' [10]. Last year, Malalai Joya, a female MP, was physically attacked in parliament and threatened with death for criticising other members, notorious for their past and current human rights abuses [11].

4. Since 2001, torture and ill-treatment of detainees in US custody in Afghanistan is alleged to have included: sleep deprivation, stripping and forced nudity, stress positions, electric shocks, immersion in water, and cigarette burns [12].

Moreover, unlike their counterparts at Guantanamo those held at Bagram airbase have no access to lawyers and no right to hear the allegations against them [13].

5. US/NATO bombing has killed hundreds – maybe thousands – of civilians since the start of 2006.

According to the UN mission in Afghanistan, more Afghan civilians died at the hands of US/NATO forces in the first six months of this 2007 than were killed by the Taliban [14].

Based on their own field research, the respected international policy think tank the Senlis Council, estimates that as many as 2-3,000 Afghan civilians may have been killed by US/NATO air strikes in southern Afghanistan during 2006 [15].

6. British forces have called in hundreds of airstrikes during 2007, killing dozens of civilians [16].

One such attack, in June 2007, killed 25 civilians, including nine women and three young children [17].

The use of air power, and the human carnage it causes, is central to the occupation. As one NATO official explained: “[W]ithout air, we’d need hundreds of thousands of troops” [18].

7. British forces have fired more than 2 million rounds in Afghanistan since the beginning of 2006 [19].

In late 2006 UK helicopter commanders in Afghanistan requested the acquisition of thermobaric warheads to improve the ‘effectiveness’ of their Hellfire missiles [20], and British soldiers are being supplied with a shoulder-launched “enhanced blast weapon” based on thermobaric technology.

When used in confined spaces like buildings and caves, thermobaric weapons create a pressure wave which rips apart the internal organs of anyone caught inside.

8. US/NATO policies have caused a humanitarian crisis in southern Afghanistan.

In December 2006 the Senlis Council reported that ‘famine’ was widespread in southern Afghanistan, ‘directly triggered by the international community’s policies in the region’ – in particular, ‘the devastation of Afghan villagers’ livelihoods by intense bombing campaigns and ... poppy eradication’ [21].

9. Aerial spraying of Afghanistan’s opium poppies – a policy that “could cause famine” – is likely to begin next year.

According to the *FT*, the new US ambassador to Kabul - who oversaw US-backed coca-eradication programmes in Colombia – ‘is understood to have told the Europeans spraying will begin next year’ [22].

The humanitarian impact of spraying - as people’s livelihoods are destroyed - could be horrific: in February 2006, the then- Minister for the Middle East, Kim Howells, admitted that “aerial spraying could cause famine” [23].

In Colombia, blood analyses indicate that those living near the frontier of spraying suffer chromosomal damage, and are at greater risk of developing cancer, mutations and congenital malformations’ [24].

10. British hopes of brokering a series of ‘peace deals’ across Helmand province in southern Afghanistan – deals that would have permitted large-scale withdrawal of British troops - were sabotaged by the US early in 2007.

In February 2007 a potentially precedent-setting deal in the town of Musa Qala, collapsed following the appointment - under intense US pressure - of a new governor

who disowned the accord, and a US airstrike which killed the brother and 20 followers of a key local Taliban leader [25].

11. In May 2007 the upper house of the Afghan Parliament passed a motion, calling for a military cease-fire, negotiations with the Taliban, and a date to be set for the withdrawal of foreign troops [26].

According to the secretary of the upper house, Aminuddin Muzafari, the motion reflected lawmakers' belief that negotiations would be more effective than fighting.

12. A majority of the British public wants all British troops withdrawn from Afghanistan.

In a March 2007 poll, 53% of the British public said that all British troops should be withdrawn from Afghanistan 'more or less immediately' [27]. In an August 2007 poll, 65% said that all British troops should be withdrawn from Afghanistan 'immediately' (28%) or 'within the next year or so' (37%) [28].

13. There are currently more British troops in Afghanistan than in Iraq, and the number in Afghanistan is likely to increase still further.

According to Air Chief Marshall Sir Jock Stirrup 'the current force of almost 7,700 troops is likely to expand as British influence spreads across Helmand' (*Daily Telegraph*, 27 July 2007).

ENDNOTES

[1] How a 'Good War' in Afghanistan Went Bad, *New York Times*, 12 August 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/38pdtj>

[2] Afghanistan must not be Britain's Vietnam, *Independent*, 15 July 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/2yj6x5>

[3] See p. 37 – 38 of Milan Rai, *War Plan Iraq*, Verso 2002.

[4] Marc Herold, *Daily Casualty Count of Afghan Civilians Killed by US Bombing and Special Forces Attacks, October 7 until present day*, October 16 2003, <http://tinyurl.com/3bu9af>

[5] Forgotten Victims, *Guardian*, 20 May 2002, <http://tinyurl.com/3ac795>

[6] For a thorough account see p. 117 – 166 of Kolhatkar and Ingalls, *Bleeding Afghanistan: Washington, Warlords and the Propaganda of Silence*, Seven Stories Press, 2006. Of course, there is nothing new about any of this: Britain first invaded Afghanistan in the late 1830s in order to install their own puppet monarch. A "dodgy dossier" (Lord Auckland's 'Simla Manifesto' of 1838) was even published to justify the invasion.

[7] 'The Rule of the Gun: Human Rights Abuses and Political Repression in the Run-up to Afghanistan's Presidential Election', Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper, September 2004. <http://tinyurl.com/2azshh>

[8] Country Summary: Afghanistan, Human Rights Watch, January 2006. <http://tinyurl.com/2easpz>

[9] Country Summary: Afghanistan, Human Rights Watch, January 2006. <http://tinyurl.com/2easpz>

[10] 'No One Listens To Us and No One Treats Us as Human Beings: Justice Denied to Women', Amnesty International, 6 October 2003. <http://tinyurl.com/6xder>

[11] Country Summary: Afghanistan, Human Rights Watch, January 2007. <http://tinyurl.com/ypl765>

[12] 'USA: US detentions in Afghanistan: an aide-mémoire for continued action', Amnesty International, 7 July 2005. <http://tinyurl.com/ys8ro9>

[13] 'A Growing Afghan Prison Rivals Bleak Guantánamo', *New York Times*, 26 February 2006. <http://tinyurl.com/zu9z5>

[14] 'Errant Afghan civilian deaths surge', *LA Times*, 6 July 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/yr8zet>

[15] Section B.2, Chapter 2, 'Hearts and Minds in Southern Afghanistan', Senlis Council, December 2006. <http://tinyurl.com/yqhs3m>.

[16] 'Civilian death toll rises in the bloody battle of Helmand', *Observer*, 12 August 2007. <http://tinyurl.com/25k524>.

[17] '25 Afghan civilians die in NATO crossfire', *International Herald Tribune*, 22 June 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/269ytv>. '25 civilians killed in airstrike after Britons attacked', *The Times*, 23 June 2007.

[18] ' Afghan civilian deaths damaging NATO', *International Herald Tribune*, 13 May 2007. <http://tinyurl.com/24n7fe>

[19] 'Afghanistan operation is 'long-term commitment'', *Independent*, 14 August 2007.

[20] 'UK looks at thermobaric hellfire for Afghanistan', *Janes Defence Weekly*, 28 March 2007.

[21] Chapter 3, 'Hearts and Minds in Southern Afghanistan', Senlis Council, December 2006. <http://tinyurl.com/yqhs3m>.

[22] 'Allies fall out over poppy spraying', *Financial Times*, 29 May 2007. <http://tinyurl.com/27v898>

[23] *Hansard*, 7 Feb 06, Col 728.

[24] O'Shaughnessy and Branford, *Chemical Warfare in Colombia*, Latin America Bureau, 2005, p.74.

[25] 'Taliban town seizure throws Afghan policy into disarray', *Observer*, 4 February 2007. <http://tinyurl.com/2u68b8>. Selig S. Harrison, 'Discarding an Afghan Opportunity', *Washington Post*, 30 January 2007. <http://tinyurl.com/yqra9o>

[26] 'Afghan lawmakers call for ceasefire', *Associated Press*, 9 May 2007, see <http://tinyurl.com/39lmtg>

[27] YouGov poll, 26 - 28 March 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/24rear>

[28] YouGov poll, 9 – 10 August 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/2gxcyv>

Bombing Afghanistan: A Partial List of Civilian Deaths in 2007.

Deaths caused by the bombing of Afghanistan rarely receive much attention in the British media. The following is a *partial* list of *reported, civilian* deaths due to US/NATO airstrikes in 2007:

November 2007: Several civilians – including at least 2 children - are killed in a NATO airstrike in northwestern Afghanistan, according to local residents [Source: *Reuters*, 6 November 2007]

October 2007: At least 13 civilians are killed in NATO airstrike near Kabul, according to the head of Wardak provincial council, Haji Hazrat Janan. According to Janan 11 people from one family, including women and children, were killed [Source: *BBC*, 23 October 2007].

20 September 2007: Six Afghan civilians, most of them women and children, are killed in a NATO air strike during a battle with Taliban fighters in southern Afghanistan, according to a district governor [Source: *Agence France Presse*, 20 September 2007]

26 August 2007: 18 civilians are killed and over 22 wounded in a NATO airstrike in southern Afghanistan, according to local residents. [Source: *Hindustan Times*, 26 August 2007]

7 July 2007: Afghan elders claim 108 civilians have been killed by bombing in western Afghanistan during the previous week. Villagers in the northeast say a further 25 civilians were also killed in airstrikes. [Source: *Associated Press*, 8 July 2007]

30 June 2007: An airstrike on Helmand kills more than 30 civilians. [Source: *Reuters*, 30 June 2007]

22 June 2007: Twenty-five civilians, including nine women and three young children, are killed by NATO airstrikes called in by British forces in the Gereskh district of Helmand [Source: *The Times*, 23 June 2007].

18 June 2007: An airstrike on a religious school in south-eastern Afghanistan kills seven children [Source: *Guardian*, 19 June 2007]. On 27 Jun MSNBC.com reports that, 'According to several officials, and contrary to previous statements, the U.S. military knew there were children at the compound' but considered its primary target to be 'of such high value it was worth the risk of potential collateral damage.'

27 May 2007: At least 47 civilians – including at least two girls, Najeba (9) and Fatima (10) - are killed following a US airstrike on a wedding party in Haji Nabu. Predictably, a spokesperson for the US-led forces 'denied that any innocent people had died.' [Source: *Sunday Times*, 24 June 2007].

21 May 2007: At least 16 civilians are killed in the US bombing of Azizi village

in Kandahar (Source: *Associated Press*, 7 Jun).

8 May 2007: Over 50 civilians are killed in airstrikes on the village of Sarwan Qala in Helmand, according to local residents.). “Three houses were completely destroyed,” a shop keeper who lives near the village, told the *New York Times*. “One of the houses belonged to Faizullah. The family of seven is dead, the whole family. Still now they are digging the bodies from the rubble.” [Source: *New York Times*, 11 May 2007].

April 2007: Fifty-seven civilians – almost half of them women and children – are killed when US forces bomb a village in Herat, destroying 100 homes. “The bombardments were going on day and night,” Mohammad Zarif Achakzai, whose eighteen-year-old son was killed in the bombing, told the *BBC*. “Those who tried to get out somewhere safe were being bombed. They didn’t care if it was women, children or old men.” [Source: *BBC*, 31 May 2007]