

Journalist Robert Fisk beaten by Afghan refugees

Julie Hyland

12 December 2001

Veteran British journalist Robert Fisk, who writes for the *Independent* newspaper, was attacked and beaten by Afghan refugees in Pakistan last weekend.

In an account of the attack, Fisk, who suffered facial, hand and head injuries, said he understood the refugees' anger, as many had relatives who had been killed by the US bombing of Afghan city Kandahar only the previous week. And in a graphic, and moving account of the assault, Fisk said that it "was symbolic of the hatred and fury and hypocrisy of this filthy war."

Fisk reports that he was attacked when his car broke down as he drove through a village housing Afghan refugees near to the border city of Quetta. A crowd of 40 to 50 destitute people gathered. At first the exchanges were friendly, with Fisk and his colleague Justin Huggler shaking hands and exchanging greetings.

Very quickly, however, the mood turned ugly. A small child threw a stone, which was followed by many more. "And then I find myself being punched and beaten in the face. My glasses were smashed and my spare glasses were ripped away from me. I was covered in blood and couldn't see anything. I was obviously frightened."

"The more I bled, the more the crowd gathered and beat me with their fists," writes Fisk. "Pebbles and small stones began to bounce off my head and shoulders... My head was suddenly struck by stones on both sides at the same time - not thrown stones but stones in the palms of men who were using them to try to crack my skull."

At this point, Fisk recalled his long experience covering the wars in the Lebanon. "The Lebanese taught me, over and over again, how to stay alive: take a decision—any decision—but don't do nothing". And so he fought back, "bashing" his fist into several of his

assailants.

"What had I done, I kept asking myself? I had been punching and attacking Afghan refugees, the very people I had been writing about for so long, the very dispossessed, mutilated people whom my own country—among others—was killing, with the Taliban, just across the border... The men whose families our bombers were killing were now my enemies too."

Fisk was eventually rescued and taken for treatment. Besides his injuries, he had also lost several pairs of glasses, his mobile phone and his contact book containing 25 years of numbers. "It was a very frightening experience and I am in a lot of pain but I am glad to be alive. I'm going to bear the scars for the rest of my life—sadly I broke down in the wrong place at the wrong time."

The award-winning correspondent, who has covered the Middle East for over 25 years, is not the first journalist to become a casualty of Washington's war against Afghanistan. With little chance of defending themselves against almost continuous US bombardment from the skies, Western journalists—who are regarded as little more than propaganda tools of their respective governments—have been easy targets for attack by Taliban fighters. Several journalists have been injured, and eight killed—higher than the number of Western soldiers killed in action in Afghanistan.

Unlike many others in his profession, Fisk has been an outspoken critic of US and British policy in Afghanistan. In his most forthright piece to date, Fisk accused US and British forces of war crimes in Afghanistan. In a November 30 comment entitled, "We Are Now War Criminals", referring to the massacre of Taliban prisoners at the Qala-i-Janghi fortress, Fisk wrote that "US Special Forces—and, it has emerged, British troops—helped the Alliance to overcome the

uprising and, sure enough, CNN tells us some prisoners were ‘executed’ trying to escape.

“It is an atrocity. British troops are now stained with war crimes.” Only days later, he continued, more executed Taliban members had been found in Kunduz.

The US bore particular responsibility for the massacre, Fisk insisted. “The US Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, stated quite specifically during the siege of the city that US air raids on the Taliban defenders would stop ‘if the Northern Alliance requested it’.

“Leaving aside the revelation that the thugs and murderers of the Northern Alliance were now acting as air controllers to the USAF in its battle with the thugs and murderers of the Taliban, Mr Rumsfeld’s incriminating remark places Washington in the witness box of any war-crimes trial over Kunduz. The US were acting in full military cooperation with the Northern Alliance militia”.

The West is jettisoning every human rights’ precedent it has claimed to uphold during the past 50 years. After the end of World War Two, those accused of Nazi war crimes were put on trial at Nuremberg, and thousands of pages of evidence produced describing “The secret courts and death squads and torture and extra judicial executions carried out by rogue states and pathological dictators. Quite right too”, Fisk wrote. Now the West has adopted the same methods. President Bush’s decision to sign into law “secret military courts to try and then liquidate anyone believed to be a ‘terrorist murderer’,“ amounts to “legally sanctioned American government death squads,” writes Fisk.

In the same comment, Fisk reserved particular contempt for the majority of television journalists, who “to their shame, have shown little or no interest in these disgraceful crimes. Cosying up to the Northern Alliance, chatting to the American troops, most have done little more than mention the war crimes against prisoners in the midst of their reports”.

He wrote with disgust of Europe’s leaders, “the Blairs, Schroeders, Chiracs” who “have remained so gutlessly silent in the face of the Afghan executions and East European-style legislation sanctified since September 11.”

Yes, the “Taliban were a cruel bunch of bastards”, and yes, “September 11 was a crime against humanity”, he continued. But he was neither for Osama bin Laden

nor George Bush. “I’m actively against the brutal, cynical, lying ‘war of civilisation’ that he has begun so mendaciously in our name and which has now cost as many lives as the World Trade Center mass murder.”

The same sentiments are evident in Fisk’s account of his beating in Pakistan. He decided to record his “few minutes of terror and self-disgust”, because “I don’t want this to be seen as a Muslim mob attacking a Westerner for no reason”. Responsibility for the “silly, bloody, tiny incident” lay with the West, he wrote. The refugees “had every reason to be angry”. In their position, “I would have attacked Robert Fisk. Or any other Westerner I could find.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact