Relatives of September 11 victims expose human toll of US war in Afghanistan

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Relatives of several of the victims of the September 11 terrorist attacks spoke at a public meeting in Brooklyn, New York on January 27, after returning from an eight-day trip to Afghanistan. They reported on the plight of Afghan civilians whose lives have been devastated by the US war on their country.

The meeting was sponsored by the local Green Party and the War Resisters' League on behalf of Global Exchange, a San Francisco-based human rights group which organized the trip to bring together the US and Afghan victims.

Rita Lasar of New York City lost her brother, Abe Zelmanowitz, age 55, in the World Trade Center attack when he insisted on staying behind to assist a wheelchair-bound friend on the twenty-seventh floor. A retired small businesswoman, she has spoken out repeatedly against the US bombing campaign.

Kelly Campbell, 29, is a California-based environmental activist. Her 28-year-old brother-in-law, Craig Amundson, was killed in the attack on the Pentagon. She traveled on behalf of his widow, Amber Amundson.

A third tour member speaking to the capacity audience at the Park Slope United Methodist Church was Medea Benjamin of Global Exchange.

The meeting exposed the cynicism and hypocrisy behind the campaign to use the victims of September 11 and their relatives to whip up popular support for the Bush administration's war drive as well as the attacks on democratic rights and civil liberties at home. This campaign has consciously avoided and covered up the thousands of civilian deaths in Afghanistan resulting from the US bombing. Not surprisingly, the Brooklyn meeting was virtually ignored by the mass media.

Kelly Campbell began her remarks by explaining her reason for traveling to Afghanistan: "The day that we held a memorial service for Craig Amundson—my brother-in-law and also my friend—we gathered to focus on his memory. We turned on the TV, and it was the day the US started bombing Afghanistan. I wanted to think about Craig, but I couldn't help but think about all the innocent lives that were about to be lost, and I realized more had to be done."

Ms. Campbell brought photographs of children whose stories she shared as she held up their pictures. A six-year-old living in a neighborhood where eight people were killed had stopped talking immediately after the attack. "Nobody knows why the neighborhood was bombed, except that it is near Kabul airport, which they suppose was the intended target," she said.

She then showed pictures of a nine-year-old girl and a ten-year-old boy who lived in a house that was bombed in the same neighborhood, next door to the one in which the eight people were killed. They too had stopped talking. "There is no such thing in Afghanistan as treatment for mental disorders," she reported. She also spoke of a 25-year-old mother with a seven-year-old son whose house was bombed. "They want to rebuild but have no money to rebuild. Both are severely traumatized."

A 20-year-old man in his house when it was bombed "took shrapnel in his leg," Campbell recounted. "He spent one month in the hospital before they decided it had to be amputated. The only prosthetic legs available in Afghanistan are wooden ones, which are very painful. This man had been working as a painter for his father before the bombing. His income had been sending his sister and brother to school, but now they can no longer go. This family also wants to rebuild, but there are no funds from the US government, which bombed their house."

Ms. Campbell described people who used to live and

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farm in an area next to a large crater made by a US bomb. Showing a picture of the crater, she added, “The people who lived near here can no longer farm due to the cluster bombs left in the area.... Everywhere we turned we met someone who had been affected by the bombing.”

Rita Lasar was the next speaker. “Soon after September 11, I felt sick that in my brother’s name other innocent people were going to be killed,” she declared. “I spoke at peace rallies, but I knew that wouldn’t do it, that more had to be done.

“Afghanistan is filled with the most generous, beautiful, good, kind, intelligent people I have met anywhere, ” Ms. Lasar added. She described children in classrooms as “eager to learn” in spite of having next to nothing to work with, not to mention all of the problems created by their conditions of life. “They live in rubble—imagine sandcastles after the water has started to wash them away.”

She described Kabul’s Intercontinental Hotel—the best in town—as having neither hot nor cold running water, no working elevators, nor any heat in the middle of winter. Yet her living conditions on tour were far superior to those endured by most Afghans: “We talked with a family of 10 people living out in the cold, not because they don’t have a home, but because cluster bombs surrounded their home and it was not safe for them to be there.”

“People came to us after they had received no help either from their government or from the US government. They handed us lists of names of people who needed help and said to us, ‘Please give this to somebody and see if they can do anything for us.’” Lasar held up some of the lists she had been given.

She described a woman whose husband and seven children were killed in the bombing and who had no way to support herself. “She went to the US Embassy and was told, ‘Go away, we don’t accept beggars.’ We alerted the press and went back to the embassy with her. The gates were closed with Marines behind the gates. After breaking down and crying, she managed to tell her story to the press. We then got one of the Marines to take the letter telling her story and promise to give it to the top US official there.”

Medea Benjamin from Global Exchange discussed the general impact of the US bombing: “The people here were so poor to begin with, after the bombing campaign began, they had nowhere to turn. There have been more casualties in this war than in the Balkan War. Why does the US continue to use cluster bombs, which most countries put in the same category as land mines?” She cited the report by Marc Herold of the University of New Hampshire, conservatively documenting the deaths of over 4,000 Afghan civilians since the bombing began.

The purpose of the Global Exchange-sponsored trip was, as Ms. Benjamin explained, to get the United States government to set up a massive fund for humanitarian aid to the Afghan victims of its assault; and further, to get the US government to give an accounting of how many Afghan civilians were killed in the bombing, and to explain how the deaths occurred. The tour participants were headed to Washington, DC the next evening to lobby Congress for these proposals.

It must be said that expectations the US government will exhibit any humanitarian concern for its Afghan victims is extremely naïve at best. The deaths and devastation being visited on Afghanistan are not the result of some mistake that can be corrected by a more humane imperialist policy. Rather than give an accounting of the number of deaths, US forces have continued their bombing campaign, and when confronted with their “mistakes” in the form of civilian deaths, regularly claim the victims were al Qaeda and Taliban fighters.

The latest such incident occurred on January 24, when US commandos killed 21 village soldiers in an unprovoked pre-dawn raid on former school buildings that had been turned into weapons depots as part of a local disarmament campaign in the mountain village of Oruzgan, 100 miles north of Kandahar. No Taliban activity had been reported there in over a month, since the interim government took over in Kabul last December 22.

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