

Afghan police shoot student protesters

Peter Symonds
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As many as four students are dead and others were seriously injured on Monday night after police in Kabul opened fire with automatic weapons on hundreds of demonstrators protesting over the appalling conditions in their university dormitories. The protest reportedly erupted when students found that, after observing the traditional Muslim Ramadan fast during daylight hours, food for the evening meal had run out.

The clashes continued on Tuesday when hundreds of students attempted to leave the university to voice their anger over the deaths of their colleagues and the lack of electricity, heating, water and food. Police used water cannon and fired automatic weapons into the air to drive the protesters back onto the campus then surrounded a university building that students had occupied. A number of demonstrators were badly beaten and several were arrested.

A young student, Hamid, told reporters: “Last night [Monday] some of our friends were killed in a demonstration. Today we wanted to march peacefully to the presidential palace and look what has happened. For the last three or four days we have had nothing to eat and no electricity in our hostel.”

Zalmay Omarkhel, an agriculture student, said: “We lack food, water, electricity and other necessary things. Now they are killing us, too. We don’t know if we live in a democracy or a dictatorship.” A protester, Abdul Hadi, explained: “It is so cold here at night that we can’t study. We are often having to read and write by candlelight.”

Police and Interior Ministry officials attempted to defend the shootings by alleging that some of the students had guns as well as stones and sticks. Director of Public Order Din Mohammad Jurat denounced the students saying there were “saboteurs” among them. No evidence has been produced to support these accusations.

Deputy Interior Minister General Helal claimed that

the protesters were shouting slogans in support of Al Qaeda and bin Laden, adding: “Police have to prevent any kind of sedition or any action that causes tension”. But as one student, Umaid, told Associated Press: “Everyone who protests is said to be Taliban or Al Qaeda. It doesn’t matter if you are starving and you protest. They say that you are Taliban.”

The brutal police methods used against the students reflect deep concerns in the administration of President Hamid Karzai and the security apparatus over the potential for such protests to trigger wider political and social unrest. The conditions facing university students in their dilapidated dormitories are similar to those confronting the majority of Afghans—a difficult daily struggle for the basic necessities of life.

Karzai convened an emergency meeting of senior officials on Tuesday to discuss the protests. In order to placate students, he ordered an investigation into the police shooting and went on state television to offer his condolences to the families of the dead protesters. At the same time, however, he warned students: “I again want to emphasise that a university is not a place of politics.” Higher Education Minister Mohammed Sharif Faiz threatened to close the dormitories if there were further protests.

Yesterday marked a year since the US-backed militia of the Northern Alliance marched into Kabul to take over from a rapidly crumbling Taliban regime. The student protests highlight the failure of the Karzai government and the major powers to address the abject poverty that confronts the vast bulk of the population. The ongoing social crisis underscores the fact that the US military intervention was never about creating peace and prosperity in Afghanistan but was to further Washington’s predatory aims in the region.

At a meeting in Tokyo in January to discuss the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan, the major powers grandly promised \$5 billion in aid over five

years—far less than Kabul was seeking. Little of that money has been provided and the Karzai administration is struggling to pay its officials, let alone meet the pressing needs of the population. At a meeting of donor countries in September, US Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill appealed for \$165 million to fund the Karzai administration for six months, saying: “[T]hey don’t know from one day to the next whether they’re going to have the money to keep going.”

Much of the capital remains in ruins and services are either rudimentary or non-existent. Outside the capital, the situation is far worse. Basic infrastructure destroyed during two decades of war has not been repaired. Food shortages are common, particularly in areas suffering from drought. Many people do not have access to health services.

According to a report last month by the World Food Program, four million people in rural areas, or nearly 20 percent of the total population, will require food aid to survive the next 12 months. Of those, an estimated 1.4 million people live in areas that are inaccessible after the onset of winter. The figure did not include “the urban vulnerable, returnees and internally displaced people”.

The country’s health statistics are among the worst in the world. According to a recent UNICEF survey, the maternal mortality rate is 1,600 deaths for every 100,000 live births. The researchers estimated that 87 percent of those deaths could be prevented with prompt diagnosis and reasonable access to health care. The mortality rate for children under the age of five is the fourth highest in the world.

Karzai, who was installed with the backing of Washington, presides over a fragile administration that is deeply divided along ethnic and religious lines. Much of the security apparatus is in the hands of the Northern Alliance warlords who took over in Kabul last year. Beyond the capital, the country is under the control of competing warlords and militia commanders who have imposed their own arbitrary and often brutal rule.

Incapable of resolving the country’s immense political and social contradictions, Karzai is completely reliant on the US and other major powers to maintain his rule. As the police response to the student protests demonstrates, his administration is acutely sensitive to any opposition, even if not overtly political, and will not hesitate to crush it.



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