

Afghanistan under occupation: An assessment—Part 1

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14 February 2007

This is the first of a three-part series examining the situation in Afghanistan five years after the US-led invasion.

More than five years after the US and its allies invaded Afghanistan, promising a brighter post-Taliban future, average life expectancy across the country is now just 44 years—at least 20 years lower than in neighbouring Central Asian countries. Afghanistan now officially ranks 173rd out of 178 countries on the United Nations Human Development Index. All five countries ranked lower are in sub-Saharan Africa.

The invasion of Afghanistan, carried out for naked imperialist interests, has resulted in the further decimation of an already shattered society. The country is wracked by huge social and political tensions and is awash with guns and drugs. Warlord commanders and local officials can impose their will with impunity, and President Hamid Karzai is little more than a city mayor.

There is no question that the Taliban—furnished with money and weaponry from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and other regional states—has re-emerged as a force in the south and east of the country. But attempts by NATO and US commanders to portray the Afghan insurgency as a purely Taliban affair are false. All indications point to a growing popular opposition towards both foreign troops and the puppet-Karzai government, fed by ever-harsher living conditions and dashed hopes.

The deployment of NATO forces into Afghanistan constituted the largest in the history of the Western military alliance. Afghanistan was also the first significant arena of operations for NATO troops outside of mainland Europe. There are currently more than 33,000 foreign troops stationed in Afghanistan under the command of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The force has increased from 9,000 in less than a year. The US has an additional 12,000 soldiers in the country and has announced further troop increases.

But the security situation across Afghanistan is deteriorating. Bloodshed last year returned to levels not seen since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, with the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar and areas in the east of the country witnessing the heaviest clashes between insurgents and NATO/US forces.

An estimated 4,400 Afghans are believed to have died in the insurgency and conflict-related violence in 2006, according to Human Rights Watch, and although no tally is officially kept, at least a quarter of them are thought to have been civilians. More than 160 foreign soldiers were also killed last year.

NATO's ISAF took over large parts of Afghanistan in July last year. In September, ISAF launched Operation Medusa, west of Kandahar, which led to some of the heaviest fighting since the invasion in 2001.

A report by the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board, a body with Afghan and international representatives, was released in November to mark the fifth anniversary of the fall of the Taliban regime. It stated that insurgents launched more than 600 attacks a month in 2006, a fourfold increase from the monthly average of 130 in 2005. These include a record number of roadside bombs and suicide attacks.

All indications are that the scale and ferocity of the insurgency have taken NATO commanders by surprise. NATO's practice of moving its military convoys through heavily populated areas resulted in an incident in November 2005 involving British troops rampaging through the streets of Kandahar city, shooting at civilians indiscriminately, following a suicide bomb attack. In the days following the Kandahar incident, Karzai apparently broke down in tears at a press conference and at another warned NATO forces and the Pakistani regime that if the Afghan insurgency continued to grow, "the whole region will run into hell with us."

A BBC examination last year of the insurgency across Afghanistan commented, "In some areas it's difficult to distinguish between attacks by the Taliban and those by other radical Islamic groups or individuals."

"These include Hezb-e Islami, headed by former Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, or those loyal to Jalaluddin Haqqani, a former mujahedin leader who also served in the Taliban government."

"The situation is further complicated by a complex web of shifting allegiances, tribal, ethnic and local rivalries and feuds within Afghan society."

NATO operations have relied extensively on calling in US attack aircraft, with deadly consequences for Afghan civilians. According to Human Rights Watch, in June of last year the US Central Command confirmed 340 air strikes in Afghanistan, double the 160 strikes in Iraq in the same month.

A US air strike in October, in southern Afghanistan's volatile Panjwayi district, killed between 50 and 90 civilians, according to accounts provided by the Afghan government and villagers. Yet NATO conceded only 12 civilian deaths.

US air strikes have also been used to exact reprisals against civilian populations, such as in July 2005, when 17 civilians were killed in a US air raid on the remote village of Chechal in the northeast province of Kunar. The attack took place just five kilometres from where a US Chinook helicopter was shot down four days previously.

In August, Human Rights Watch said Karzai and donor nations had failed to meet promises to improve governance, the economy and security.

"Afghanistan hasn't really met any of the benchmarks" on improving human rights or security, said Sam Zafiri, Asia research director of Human Rights Watch. "Life is so dangerous that many Afghans don't feel safe enough to go to school, get healthcare, or take goods to market."

Even if one were to take on face value all the talk from Washington and Kabul about "restoring democracy" and "reconstruction," the clearest indicator of the potential "success" of this venture would be the confidence of the mass of Afghans in a decent future. But towards the end of 2006, ABC News in the US and the BBC World Service conducted face-to-face interviews with 1,036 randomly selected Afghan adults across the country. The survey can only be read as a devastating verdict on life in Afghanistan five years since the invasion.

According to the poll, the number of Afghans who believe the country is

heading in the right direction is down from 77 to 55 percent, while those who think security is better now than under the Taliban are down from 75 percent to 58 percent.

In general terms, those who were optimistic about their own future had dropped from 67 percent to 54 percent. The results revealed an even larger collapse in optimism about the country's future in the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar. Here, only 4 out of 10 people think things are "heading in the right direction"—barely half the figure of a year ago. Fully 80 percent rate their security as poor.

Particularly alarming for the Karzai regime and its military backers will be the high percentage of Afghans—78 percent—who view widespread government corruption as a major problem. One in 4 report that they or someone they know has had to pay a bribe to receive proper service from the government, and that jumps to 4 in 10 in the country's northwest. A recent report by the US government was highly critical of the country's police force, deeming it largely corrupt and calling it incapable of even "routine law enforcement duties."

Since October 2001, some 15,000 to 18,000 Afghans have been killed directly due to the post-invasion fighting. As in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan has also expressed its tragic waste of life in the numbers of mainly young foreign soldiers killed. A total of 520 soldiers have so far died from the US, Britain, Canada, Italy and other countries around the world. This does not include the deaths of foreign mercenaries.

In the dying days of the Taliban regime, a major drought was affecting millions of Afghans in the outlying regions of the country. It factored in some of the propaganda used to justify the US-led invasion and occupation of the country, implying that to save Afghans from starvation it was imperative to oust the Taliban and install a Western-friendly regime. Five years later, drought has once again returned to large parts of the country, with a very real danger of famine.

Farmers and nomads constitute about three quarters of the Afghan population, although only about 12 percent of the land is arable. The combined effects of invasion, displacement and drought have left almost 55 percent of the rural population in dire poverty.

In November, a Christian Aid assessment of the drought across five northern and western provinces revealed that farmers have on average lost 80-100 percent of their crops in the worst affected areas and water sources in many villages had dried up.

The UN recently stated that almost 2 million people are at risk of starvation. Its World Food Programme had previously estimated that 6.5 million Afghans are at risk of hunger, but it has only received one third of the funds it needs to help the drought victims.

More and more, the plight of the rural Afghan population is reminiscent of the famine-infested landscape of sub-Saharan Africa.

Anjali Kwatra, of Christian Aid, wrote the following account from the western province of Herat, published by the BBC on November 22:

"In a graveyard on a hill overlooking the village of Sya Kamarak in western Afghanistan, villagers gathered last week for the funerals of three young children who died of hunger. They died on the same day from malnutrition caused by a devastating drought that has hit western, northern and southern Afghanistan.

"There were no doctors' reports to confirm the cause of death—the parents were too poor to take them to the clinic which is one day's walk away."

One of the infants who starved to death was a three-month-old called Nazia. Kwatra interviewed her mother, Jan Bibi, who said she had been reduced to feeding her daughter with just boiled water and sugar because she had nothing else left: "My baby died because of inadequate food. I wanted to breastfeed her but I was not producing enough milk."

Bibi's surviving daughter Merzia was the size of a newborn rather than a three-month-old and cried continually for food.

"I am worried about my baby," said Bibi. "The future is dark because

we don't have food or water or fuel for heating. We have to walk for four hours to get to the nearest fresh water—we don't know how we will survive."

The villagers of Sya Kamarak said that 50 children had died so far last year. Almost all the 300 families in the village live off the land. Most lost all their wheat harvest when the rains failed in the months of April and May. Village elders say that droughts used to occur every 15 to 20 years, but the last drought finished just 2 years ago.

The attitude of many of the poorest farmers in the western provinces towards the insurgency, largely active in the south and east of the country, is revealing. Many who spoke to the BBC said they could understand why people would take up arms and fight the occupation forces when they were desperately poor. One of the fathers who buried their children in Sya Kamarak was Attalullah. Sitting in his two-room mud hut, he explained:

"We have just a few kilograms of flour left to make bread with and we spend all day collecting twigs to use for fuel for cooking and heating. If anyone will provide us with a means of livelihood then we would join them rather than starve to death."

Some farmers said they would now consider growing poppies to earn enough to buy food. Saed Azam, director of communications at the Ministry of Counter-Narcotics, said recently, "The drought is another blow to the poor farmers in the rural areas, and of course it could be one of the reasons driving the Afghan population to derive their livelihoods from poppies."

In July, Mark Dummett, the BBC News correspondent in Kabul, revealed that the drought had started to take a toll on the region's livestock. In Kabul's main livestock market, where cattle, sheep, buffalo and camels are sold, the traders' prices were being forced down. Many herders and shepherds had already chosen to sell their animals, rather than wait for their fodder to run out.

One herder, Sher Shah, was too late. "Three of my cows died," he said. "I've only got two left. The water ran out, and so did the grass."

The drought has also hit hard in the south of the country. In Zabul province, for example, hundreds of families have abandoned their villages after their water supplies ran out (according to the most recent figures, only 25 percent of the Afghan population has access to clean drinking water). The Karzai government recently conceded that 20,000 families have been displaced across the south due to a combination of fighting and drought. The actual numbers are likely to be much higher.

Living conditions for Afghanistan's 7.5 million city dwellers has also deteriorated in the past five years. Most of the urban population (which is estimated to double to around 13 million by 2015) is concentrated in Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, Jalalabad and Kunduz. All six cities have devastated infrastructures from almost three decades of conflict. Pressures on them have been exacerbated over the past few years by the combined influx of returning refugees, impoverished rural migrants and displaced sections of the population, often fleeing the fighting in the south and east of the country.

High unemployment (officially 30 percent in Kabul) and the rising cost of living are making life in Afghan cities intolerable for the majority of citizens. Rent prices have soared, and many families now spend half their income to share a place with others, or live in bombed-out buildings.

In a situation where teachers and civil servants earn just US\$50 a month, a 1-kilogram piece of meat is around US\$5 and the rent of one room costs on average US\$100 a month. Even construction workers, who can earn up to US\$120 a month (still only US\$4 a day), are finding it difficult to make ends meet.

In contrast, a tiny layer of construction magnates, government officials, private security contractors, drug barons and other corrupt individuals have carved out pockets of territory in the new Afghanistan that are characterised by an obscene level of opulence. Nowhere is this huge gulf between the ordinary populace and the wealthy few more striking than in

the capital.

Kabul is a largely impoverished city of more than 3 million people, and much of it lies in ruin, with insufficient supplies of either power or clean water. But here the super-rich and powerful have flourished.

In March 2006, Professor Marc Herold, from the Department of Economics and Women's Studies at the University of New Hampshire, published an extensive study, "Pseudo-Development in Karzai's Afghanistan," in which he wrote:

"The forms taken by pseudo-development in Kabul are many and grotesque: construction of luxury hotels, shopping malls and ostentatious 'corrupto-mansions,' grinding poverty amidst opulence, pervasive insecurity, lock-down and deserted streets at night, an opium and foreign monies-financed consumption boom, pervasive corruption, alcohol and prostitutes for the foreign clientele, and the long list of 'Kabul's finest'—foreign ex-pats, a bloated NGO-community, carpetbaggers and hangers-on of all stripes, money disbursers, neo-colonial administrators, opportunists, imported Chinese and former-Soviet Republic prostitutes, imported Thai masseuses in the Mustafa Hotel, bribed politicians and local power brokers, facilitators, beauticians (of the city planner or aesthetician types), members of the development establishment,...mercenaries, fortune-hunters, enforcers, etc." (<http://www.cursor.org/stories/emptyspace2.html#1>)

The Washington Post reports that the central district of Sherpur is one such gilded enclave. It once housed an army barracks and poor squatters' huts, but was taken over by the government in 2003. The huts were pulled down and the land given out to a select and generally wealthy few. The palatial mansions newly built on the site stand in stark contrast to the homes of most Kabul residents.

The newspaper continues, "Unlike typical Afghan homes, which have muted colours, simple materials and shrouded windows, the new houses seem designed to attract attention with vivid tiles, elaborate balconies and ornate columns. A 10-foot-high eagle statue perches on one roof, wings outstretched."

There is also a glitzy new shopping mall in downtown Kabul as well as a recently opened five-star hotel, the Serena (partly funded by the World Bank, through its International Finance Corporation), with rooms priced from US\$250 to US\$1,200 a night.

A December 28 Guardian report stated, "Business is booming.... Hassan Saidzada, the manager of a watch shop there sells Swiss watches to cabinet ministers, jihadi commanders and newly made Kabuli tycoons. He recently sold a Breitling watch for \$4,000 to the chief executive of a mobile phone company."

The Washington Post reported December 9 how "Farooq Shah, a salesperson in Suhrah Mobile, sells Apple iPods and giant flat-screen televisions to foreigners and the Kabul nouveaux riches. Nearby, Baki Karasu from Turkey, 41, who opened his new Beko store in the fall of 2005, sells imported refrigerators, dishwashers and ovens, but few Afghans can afford such luxuries or have the electricity to run them."

To be continued



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