Afghanistan under occupation: An assessment—Part 2

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This is the second of a three-part series examining the situation in Afghanistan five years after the US-led invasion. Part one *was posted February 14.*

Meanwhile, just across the city, one could be forgiven for mistaking the ramshackle district of Daimazang as belonging to another world entirely. The *Washington Post* explained that much of this area's residents are refugees from Pakistan and Iran who returned home after the US-led invasion, hoping for work. Instead, many families live in 10-foot-square partitioned spaces in bombed-out former office buildings, without electricity and even firewood.

One of the residents interviewed by the newspaper, Hazrat Gul, makes US$4 a day breaking stones for construction in the mountains that surround Kabul. "We just have a blanket. During the night, we get under the blanket and we try to sleep," he said.

Allahnazzar Salam asked, "What is there for us here? There are hundreds of thousands like us, perhaps millions. There is no work. We are squatting in the corner of a bombed building for shelter, there is no clean water and children die from disease here every month. Many friends who were with me in Pakistan after the Taliban took power have gone back to find work as labourers. Abroad they can work and send money back to their families to help them survive."

On December 15, Kabul authorities started destroying what it called "unlawful shops and stands" in the Pul-e-Bagh Umoomi and Pul-e-Mahmood Khan areas of the city. Confrontations between stallholders and the police followed the demolitions. The livelihood of the small shopkeepers was destroyed to clear the route to the Serena Hotel, which is regularly passed by visiting foreign dignitaries.

The homeless people of Daimazang have also been informed by officials in the past year that they must leave their present shelters because the government intends to rebuild the old offices, which belonged to the Ministry of Energy.

Indicative of the current state of Afghanistan is the fact that at the beginning of 2007, even the capital city still does not have a steady supply of electricity or clean water. Government officials say things will not noticeably improve until at least 2008, when new power lines are to be completed.

Over the past two years, the relative supply of electricity for homes in Kabul has decreased because, despite the rehabilitation of several power plants, the infrastructure cannot keep up with the influx of new residents.

Shortly after the US-led invasion of 2001, international donors committed roughly US$5 billion for Afghan reconstruction.

In 2004, with the assistance of the World Bank and other international institutions, the Afghan government completed an exercise to establish the real cost of Afghan reconstruction. The figure that emerged was around US$28 billion over the next seven years, or an average of US$4 billion per year. According to the NGO CARE International, "While the Afghan Minister of Finance acknowledges that this is a lot of money, he makes the case that this is what is required to achieve the central goal of building a state that can provide for the stability and a minimum level of prosperity for the Afghan people."

In "modern" Afghanistan, "prosperity" is defined as a per capita annual income of just US$500 and education and annual health expenditures of less than US$5 per person—to be achieved *in 10 years' time*.

Under Taliban rule, women and children suffered particularly cruel oppression. Young boys were indoctrinated into the religious madrassas (orthodox theology schools) from an early age or became child soldiers, while women and young girls virtually disappeared from social life. Any successor regime to the Taliban would not have to do a great deal in order to constitute a significant advance. But the social and political standing of women and children has not fundamentally improved in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban.

If one takes into account the effects of military and militia violence, destitution, criminality, child labour, prostitution and other forms of proliferating exploitation, the bleak conclusion is that the lot of Afghan women and children is even more miserable now than before 2001.

In the months preceding the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, the world was treated to the nauseating spectacle of First Lady Laura Bush and the British prime minister's wife, Cherie Blair, "solidarising" themselves with the oppressed Afghan women. Various female senators got in on the act. Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson (Republican of Texas) and 13 of her female senatorial colleagues introduced into Congress the Afghan Women and Children Relief Act of 2001. Vice President Dick Cheney and then-Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld both spoke out publicly on "the rights of Afghan women." Secretary of State Colin Powell told reporters in a press briefing, "The recovery of Afghanistan must entail a restoration of the rights of Afghan women."

The inequalities that affect Afghan women today are some of the worst in the world. One woman dies from pregnancy-related causes about every 30 minutes. Only 1 in 20 births has a medically trained attendant, and maternal mortality rates are 60 times higher than in industrialised countries.

Afghan women are also facing the return of centuries-old, religiously inspired subjugation that is compounded by the extreme social difficulties of family life.

An increasing number of women, driven to desperation by a combination of impossible living conditions, forced marriages and abusive husbands, are taking their own lives.

In December, the BBC cited Afghanistan's Deputy Minister of women's affairs, Maliha Sahak, reporting that in the previous nine months, 197 incidents of female self-immolation were recorded, leaving 69 women dead. According to the UN's Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Kandahar's only hospital for women, which has 40 beds, received 29 cases of suicide in two months last year, 20 of whom had set themselves alight.

The BBC cited the case of Gulsoom. Now a young adult, at 15 years of age she was married to a 40-year-old drug addict who would beat her

regularly. In 2005, she tried unsuccessfully to commit suicide. She set fire to herself but survived with terrible injuries.

Afghan women have long had to suffer violence or mysterious deaths. Even now girls are still handed over in disputes or as compensation in murder cases.

For the most part, the new "freedoms" open to women in Afghanistan, such as participation in elections, are illusory. As Farah Stockman described in the October 9, 2005, *Boston Globe*, "Larger-than-life billboards left over from the recent parliamentary election show female candidates, now free to participate in politics. They gaze down on burka-clad women begging for money below."

Girls were expressly forbidden from going to school under the Taliban. In the early days of the Karzai regime, there was much fanfare surrounding pledges to send girls to school and to rapidly develop education for all the nation's children.

While the Afghan Constitution now states that education through the ninth grade is compulsory, the reality has been quite different. According to a recent UN report, Afghanistan now has the worst education system in the world. In November, the Oxfam International charity, amongst others, reported that some 7 million Afghan children, more than half of the country's young people, do not attend school (a recent UN study put the figure closer to two thirds). The two main reasons are related to poverty and the escalating violence gripping large parts of the country.

In its report, entitled "Free, Quality Education for every Afghan Child," Oxfam noted a fivefold increase in school enrolment across Afghanistan, with around 5 million children now receiving a rudimentary education, often in crumbling buildings. But the Oxfam report warns that "poverty, crippling fees and huge distances to the nearest schools" prevent many parents from sending their children to receive even the basic education now in existence.

The report reveals a particularly serious problem amongst school-age girls. "Girls are particularly losing out with just one in five girls in primary education and one in twenty going to secondary school," Oxfam wrote in a statement accompanying the report's release.

The report also warns of a desperate shortage of trained teachers and low morale among qualified staff, whose pay is so low that many prefer other work if they can get it. It concluded by stating, "Rich countries are not providing nearly enough aid to Afghanistan despite their many promises. So far they give only $126 million a year."

The BBC reports that in the south, many schools have been wholly or partially destroyed by three decades of war and that in some areas, children "either study under the trees or in tents."

Over the last four years, it continued, an allegedly Taliban-backed campaign has seen dozens of schools destroyed and several teachers killed by "gunmen who regularly distribute notices threatening students and teachers against attending government schools." President Karzai had told parliament that 182 schools had been burnt down in the south alone last year. The BBC reported that in Zabul province, 148 out of a total of 188 schools were closed last year, and that in Ghazni province, closures meant that more than 50,000 students could not attend school.

In a graphic indication of the waning authority of the Karzai government, a senior official of the Taliban recently announced a $1 million programme to set up schools for children across eight southern provinces. Abdul Hai Mutmain said a Taliban panel would start commissioning schools in March and April. A spokesman told the BBC's Urdu service that the schools would be run in accordance with a syllabus that was used in the mujahedin schools in the 1980s, adding, "The government controls the cities [in these provinces] but we control the entire countryside, so there should be no problem running these schools."

The Afghanistan Evaluation and Research Unit (AERU), an independent research group, recently concluded that most Afghan parents want an education for both their sons and daughters. But families are often restricted by poverty. Instead, children are often sent onto the streets to help the family survive.

It has been estimated that for every child Afghan non-governmental organisations help, there are five more children still on the streets of Kabul.

According to the UN, more than 60,000 school-aged children now work on the streets of the capital. Many are orphans, with no relatives to look after them. Others are sent by impoverished parents. Young children can be found either begging, polishing and mending shoes, or selling petty items such as plastic bottles of water, trinkets, chewing gum and newspapers.

In provincial regions, fears of negative social pressures or reprisals from Taliban enforcers often prevent families from sending young girls to school.

The immediate future for Afghanistan's children remains remorselessly bleak. A quarter of them will die before the age of five. One child in eight lacks access to clean water. Living in the most land-mined region on earth, Afghan children run the greatest risk of serious injury or death from the toylike devices. They also suffer disproportionately greater danger of being killed or maimed from the US/NATO military's heavy reliance on the tactic of aerial bombardment close to civilian areas.

An estimated 300,000 children may have perished as a result of Afghanistan's recent wars.

To all intents and purposes, Afghanistan has now become a Narco-state.

The opium trade is estimated to represent 40 to 60 percent of Afghanistan's gross domestic product. Poppy cultivation is increasing in 28 of the country's 32 provinces.

More than 12 percent of the population is involved in opium production and cultivation increases, despite several eradication programmes.

Production rose 49 percent to 165,000 hectares across the country in 2006. Today, between 90 and 95 percent of the world's supply of opium comes out of Afghanistan, to end up on the streets of the world's major cities as heroin.

According to recent surveys, many more people than a year ago believe it is acceptable to cultivate opium poppies—around 40 percent on average, with the figure rising to nearly 60 percent in poppy-growing areas. This is significant, as many Afghans previously opposed opium production, based loosely on Islamic instruction.

It has been estimated that households that produce opium poppies can earn up to 36 percent more than non-growing households.

The proliferation of opium has also had tragic consequences for many Afghans, as it is estimated there are now a million hard-drug users across the country, with 40,000 opiate addicts in Kabul alone. The UN's Office on Drugs and Crime recently warned that the growing drug trade is "dragging the rest of Afghanistan into a bottomless pit of destruction and despair."

The inability of the foreign occupation forces and their client regime in Kabul to provide for even the basic needs of the mass of the population, coupled with the collapse of security, has forced many Afghans into the hands of unscrupulous drugs smugglers. The Taliban in Helmand has been promising the local farmers protection for their poppy fields against the Western-backed poppy-eradication programmes in return for their support for attacks against foreign troops. The drug chiefs in turn have found common cause with the Taliban militias, who provide transit protection in return for a cut of the opium profits.

In December, the Karzai government is believed to have reluctantly acquiesced to the latest US-sponsored anti-narcotics initiative. Despite repeating the mantra about seeing through the "mission," John Waters, head of the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy, seemed well aware of the unpopularity of such programmes when he said, "Nobody in the international community is loving this."

Afghan officials, as well as those from most NATO countries, are at best

deeply sceptical of the benefits of opium-eradication schemes led by the military. The general result of counter-narcotics operations by NATO/US troops over the past five years has been to inflame local tensions, leading either to farmers falling into the arms of the Taliban or confronting occupation troops themselves. Apart from a handful of small isolated areas, the eradication schemes have not resulted in a long-term reduction of the opium crop.

The latest venture is said to involve the spraying of herbicide over wide areas. The initial proposal involved possible aerial spraying, but the *Guardian* reported that this was countered by much criticism from other Western officials, some of whom were more cognizant of the still-painful Afghan memories of carpet-bombing in the 1980s. To mollify opposition, Walters ruled out the use of planes and said spraying would "initially" use ground-based techniques.

Taliban commanders are not the only ones who have started to take a generous slice of drug profits. As the newspaper pointed out, "The money trail also leads to the higher echelons of government, where corruption at provincial and central levels has eroded public confidence in Mr. Karzai."

To be continued