

Afghan schools and clinics built by British military to be closed down

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A confidential report recently leaked to the *Guardian* newspaper reveals that schools and health clinics built by the British military across Helmand province in Afghanistan as part its counterinsurgency strategy are to be closed down by 2014.

The report was jointly commissioned by the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), funded in part by the UK's Department for International Development and the head of the military in Regional Command South West, US Army General Charles Gurganus.

Authored by members of the British government's so-called Stabilisation Unit, the report looked at all the work that had been completed in Helmand and the funds available to the US-puppet government of President Hamid Karzai as it assumes formal responsibility for "governance".

It concluded there is a "mismatch between the value of the assets and the Afghan government's ability to maintain them."

According to the *Guardian*, "Senior British officials in Helmand are working with Afghan ministers to identify the schools and clinics that are deemed 'critical' and should remain open, while most of the rest could be phased out between now and the end of 2014."

Although exact figures were not revealed of how many schools and clinics will be affected, it is thought dozens are potentially at risk, particularly in more-rural areas. Those facilities—especially in areas further away from the central Helmand river valley, where the remit of NATO/US and Afghan government forces is more precarious—are more vulnerable to closure.

The *Guardian* commented, "The need to reduce the number of schools and clinics will be a bitter blow to the Afghans who have come to rely on them, and for the British civilians and soldiers who helped to build and restore them."

The head of the PRT in Helmand, Catriona Laing,

derided "the idea that you need in every district centre, even the really remote ones, a school, a clinic, a justice centre," adding, "It will be much more important in some areas to maintain the service than in others."

Laing has called a virtual halt to all further building projects, instead tasking the PRT to prepare "Helmand's civilian infrastructure" for the withdrawal of NATO "combat" troops and the civilian aid workforce.

"Rather than building, Laing has ordered the PRT to focus on measures that make the Afghan government accountable. She also wants to protect and expand the role of elected local councillors—Helmand is the only province to have them," said the *Guardian*.

The most senior British officer in Afghanistan, General Adrian Bradshaw, defended the building programme, placing it within the context of the geopolitical interests of the occupation forces. "It is pretty difficult to do counterinsurgency without getting involved in nation-building. Because the one complements the other and we have to have a comprehensive approach."

"COIN [counterinsurgency] campaigns are not won by military means alone", he said. "They involve economic, political and development activities that complement the military activity. It is entirely correct that we should have been involved in those things in addressing the insurgency. But I think it is very important to remain focused on the reason why we came here—to prevent Afghanistan ever becoming again a haven for Al Qaida international terrorists. That is the effect we have to deliver in the end, not the total defeat of the insurgency."

Despite the coded references and guarded comments in the leaked report, what emerges is a damning indictment of the official rationale for the US-led war and occupation of Afghanistan.

On October 7, 2001, US-led forces invaded Afghanistan using the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington as the primary official pretext. Along with

the stated goal of dismantling Al Qaeda and ending its use of Afghanistan as a base, the United States announced that it would remove the Taliban from power and create a viable democratic state. This was accompanied by blanket media coverage of the apparent newfound concern amongst the ruling elites in the US, Britain and elsewhere for Afghan women's rights and civil liberties in the face of Taliban outrages.

The subsequent brutal military occupation, enforced by more than 140,000 NATO/US troops and their increasingly unreliable Afghan hirelings, fuelled the growth of a popular insurgency that shows no sign of abating and has recently displayed increasing indications of sophistication and audacity.

An uncounted number of Afghans have been killed and wounded as a consequence of the NATO/US occupation-related violence. To date, 3,199 foreign soldiers have died as a result of the occupation—in the recent period, increasingly at the hands of so-called Afghan allies of the occupation regime—and more than 17,000 have sustained injuries.

The military occupation has been crowned by the thoroughly hated stooge regime of Hamid Karzai in Kabul, which is steeped in corruption and powerless without its imperialist sponsors.

Eleven years on, the rationale for the invasion lies in tatters. Last year, NATO—led by the US, Britain and France—invaded Libya with the direct collaboration of groups linked to Al Qaeda. In recent months, both Washington and London have made allusions to a political deal with sections of the Taliban.

And what of the claims of aiding a beleaguered population suffering under the tyranny of the Taliban, itself the product of previous US and Pakistani political and military subterfuge in the region?

The recent experience of the population of Helmand province is salient as to the social tragedy inflicted upon Afghans under military occupation.

The British army deployed to Helmand, Afghanistan's largest province, in 2006, subsequently suffering most of its 433 fatalities in the province. Initially, much was made of its efforts to win the "hearts and minds" of the local population.

The meagre infrastructural results of this cynical exercise was that around 25 health clinics were either refurbished or rebuilt with money from the PRT and spread over a population of more than 1.4 million and an area roughly the size of Switzerland. In addition, 86 schools have been restored and reopened since 2009,

bringing the total to 164 across Helmand. Twenty-six new schools have also been built.

Some of these schools were little more than tents housing a few dozen wooden benches. The others resulted in a super slush fund—from the UK state treasury—for British construction firms to profit at the tune of millions from contracts for shoddy buildings. Contracts were honoured whether the facilities were built or not.

For many families, across Helmand and the other Afghan provinces, social misery compels them to send their young children out to work, thus placing formal education out of their reach. Those who have sent their children, particularly girls, to school cannot be guaranteed protection from physical assault by extreme Taliban elements. The 14-year-old rights activist Malala Yousafza, who has campaigned for girls' education in the Swat Valley in northwest Pakistan, was shot in the head by a Taliban gunman.

Consequently, the patchy substandard network of schools is mostly non-functioning. At one point last year, the governor of Helmand, Gulab Mangal, reported that "around 80 percent of schools under ministry of education are still closed."

Helmand, especially since 2006, has experienced a greater part of the bloody carnage unleashed by the occupation. It is perhaps, more than any other Afghan province, characterised by appalling social indices even when considered within the context of one of the poorest nations on earth.

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