

2,700 feared dead as landslide buries rural Afghan town

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Search and rescue operations have been called off and as many as 2,700 residents are feared dead after the village of Abi Barak in Afghanistan's Badakhshan province, near the Himalayas in the country's remote northeast, was buried in a landslide Friday morning.

Villagers were interrupted during Friday prayers by a fast-moving wall of mud engulfing Abi Barak's densely packed, dilapidated mud-brick structures. As people rushed to the scene to save their friends and families trapped underneath the mud, a second landslide hit the town, driving casualties even higher.

Entire extended families were wiped out, and thousands more remain displaced in nearby refugee tents, amid fear that floods and additional landslides could be forthcoming.

The official response has been pitiful, with even the trickle of assistance from government sources and foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) hampered by poor to nonexistent infrastructure. With earthmoving equipment either unavailable or held up by the narrow dirt roads leading into town, rescuers have only been able to recover a small fraction of the dead—15 as of Saturday, according to the province's deputy governor.

Widely circulated pictures show hundreds of people crowded around a handful of people digging through the earth with shovels or, in one case, a single backhoe. The Afghan government, rather than recovering the dead, declared the site of the disaster a "mass grave," as it did after a 2012 landslide that killed 71 people.

The inadequate and partial aid that has reached the village has been desultory, focused on the barest of essentials for the survivors. Neighboring Kunduz Province delivered 60 tons of food supplies; the International Organization of Migration announced it was bringing solar-powered lanterns, blankets and

shelter kits.

The central government has allocated a paltry \$800,000 to the relief effort, and an official delegation to Abi Barak handed out tents, blankets, and up to \$1,000 in cash for each dead family member, according to the *New York Times*.

Barack Obama, for his part, phoned Afghan president Hamid Karzai to offer his "condolences" and pledge unspecified "assistance."

In fact, however, the principal responsibility for the terrible events in Badakhshan lies with the US occupation of Afghanistan and the war waged by the NATO to crush the Afghan people's resistance to the occupation. After the hundreds of billions of dollars that have been poured into the occupation since 2001, towns like Abi Barak, in isolated provinces like Badakhshan, lack even the barest flood control or disaster response infrastructure. Villagers are condemned to raise their families in shanties, in terrible poverty.

These conditions underlie the tragedy in Abi Barak, which was neither unpreventable nor unanticipated. Indeed, it comes amid annual heavy rains in the northern part of the country, which often cause flooding and landslides and have already killed over 159 people since April.

These conditions flow from the criminal, colonial character of the now 13-year-old US occupation, which has devastated Afghanistan and left it a primitive and deeply unequal society. According to a 2010 report by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, Afghanistan spends approximately the equivalent of 23 percent of its GDP on bribes.

The country's Transparency International Corruption Index ranking is dead last, tied with Somalia and North Korea. The entire US puppet government in

Afghanistan is held together by naked corruption from top to bottom. As was revealed last fall, Hamid Karzai accepted bags filled with US dollars from the CIA on a monthly basis for ten years.

Abi Barak is located in the territory of the former so-called “Northern Alliance” that aided US forces during the initial invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Having never been controlled by the Taliban government, it has been a relatively calm region of the country during the insurgency.

This “peace,” however, is enforced by a patronage network headed by local strongmen and dependent on the opium trade. Before the US occupation, the region accounted at one point for 79 percent of the national output of opium, by virtue of it being unaffected by the Taliban’s brief ban on the drug.

The province’s remoteness and proximity to international borders make it ideal for smuggling and drug trafficking. The district in which Abi Barak is located accounted for around 600 hectares of poppy fields in 2013, the second highest of any district in the province, according to the Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit.



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