Washington strangles Afghanistan's economy as millions face starvation

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Two months after the August 15 fall of Kabul to the Taliban and the ignominious end of Washington's 20-year war and occupation in Afghanistan, the country is teetering on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe.

Measures being taken by the Biden administration to strangle the country's economy threaten to inflict the greatest crime against humanity committed in Afghanistan over the course of decades of US imperialist intervention.

United Nations agencies are warning that over nine out of 10 Afghan families are already unable to obtain sufficient food and that over 1 million children could face acute malnutrition and even death by starvation in the coming year. Already almost half the country's children are malnourished, while there is a mounting danger of diseases like the measles and polio spreading throughout the population.

Conditions were already dire before the final withdrawal of US troops and the collapse of the American puppet regime in Kabul, with Afghanistan ranking 169th out of 189 countries on the UN's human development index. A drought has destroyed much of the wheat harvest and inflation has sent food prices soaring.

Since the consummation of the US debacle, however, the country has suffered two hammer blows. First, all foreign aid and development funds have been summarily cut off. While a large portion of this money went directly into the pockets of corrupt US-backed officials, it accounted for roughly 80 percent of the government's budget and was the mainstay of the country's economy, which in 20 years of US occupation never developed any significant industry.

Second, and even more devastating, the US has imposed unilateral sanctions against the Taliban-controlled government on the basis of having classified the former insurgent movement as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT), making it a potential crime for anyone in the US—and given secondary sanctions, anyone in the world—from dealing with it.

The US, meanwhile, has frozen some $9.5 billion in Afghanistan government assets, most of it held by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. Under pressure from the Biden administration, the International Monetary Fund has also cut off Kabul's access to hundreds of millions of dollars in emergency reserves.

The cutoff of dollar assets to Afghanistan's dollarized economy is bringing economic activity to a grinding halt, while depriving the government of cash to meet payrolls of teachers, health care professionals and other workers in vital public services, some of whom have already gone months without salaries. Non-governmental aid agencies are also unable to pay their employees or fund their operations.

Also under US pressure, the World Bank cut off $600 million in funding that underpins the country's health care system. With NGOs responsible for much of the country's health care also deprived of funds, some 2,000 hospitals and clinics, including those dedicated to treating COVID-19 patients, have been forced to shut down across Afghanistan, the Red Cross reports.

"Unless money starts flowing soon, a total economic collapse will plunge Afghans into a humanitarian catastrophe," Jan Egeland, secretary general of the Norwegian Refugee Council, warned after a visit to Afghanistan last week.

Egeland reported that the cutoff of liquidity had left his organization unable to pay staff or suppliers in Afghanistan. "Instead, we are forced to purchase tents, blankets and food in neighboring Pakistan. Now imagine this dilemma multiplied for every employer in Afghanistan."

The Biden administration's policies represent an act of raw revenge for the debacle that ended the 20-year US war, an act of collective punishment against an entire population of 40 million people for failing to support US imperialism's attempt to impose colonial-style rule. At the same time, they are driven by definite geostrategic considerations. Washington is opposed to the consolidation of any regime in Kabul that is not under its thumb, and particularly to a regime that would forge closer ties to China.

It was in this context that the G20 countries met Tuesday to consider the crisis in Afghanistan. Divisions between the

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US, Europe and China over the issue were readily apparent.

In advance of the meeting, the European Union began the talks by announcing €1 billion ($1.2 billion) "to avert a major humanitarian and socioeconomic collapse," the EU's chief Ursula von der Leyen said. The gesture no doubt expresses concerns in European capitals that the country's economic collapse will trigger a refugee flow even greater than that of 2015.

At the same time, however, there was much less than met the eye in the European package. It included €300 million already pledged, with an addition of just €250 million for Afghanistan and the rest going to neighboring countries to manage refugee flows. Given that roughly 50 percent of aid money is spent on administrative costs, this means that little more than €125 million will reach the starving Afghan people. This after a 20-year war in which Washington spent some $2 trillion and its European allies spent tens of billions of dollars.

In a thinly veiled condemnation of US policy in Afghanistan, Germany's lame-duck Chancellor Angela Merkel told reporters covering the G20, "To stand by and watch 40 million people plunge into chaos because electricity can't be supplied and no financial system exists, that cannot and should not be the goal of the international community."

Neither China's President Xi Jinping nor Russia's President Vladimir Putin participated in the G20 virtual summit. Beijing is set to participate next week in a meeting in Moscow that will include Afghanistan's neighboring countries as well as a large delegation from the Taliban.

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, however, told a G20 foreign ministers meeting that sanctions against Afghanistan's de facto government must be lifted and the country's assets unfrozen. Participating in the virtual summit, he stressed that the countries that "caused the current predicament" had a responsibility to prevent a humanitarian disaster.

A White House readout of President Joe Biden's meeting with the G20 leaders on Afghanistan stressed US determination to "maintain a laser-focus on our enduring counterterrorism efforts, including against threats from ISIS-K, and ensuring safe passage for those foreign nationals and Afghan partners with documentation seeking to depart Afghanistan," while mentioning humanitarian aid as an afterthought.

For his part, State Department spokesman Ned Price dodged a question about the US allowing Afghanistan access to its frozen assets, asserting that Washington would wait to see what the Taliban would do "six weeks from now, six months from now" to determine "what our set of incentives—sticks, carrots, everything in between—looks like with any future government of Afghanistan."

Washington has justified its policy of starving the Afghan population with references to "human rights" and by invoking the Taliban's policies towards women. Answering this propaganda line, Taliban spokesperson Inamullah Samangani said, "If they ban our assets, 90 percent of the Afghan people will fall into poverty. Isn't this also in contradiction with the principles of human rights?"

There is no doubt that the homicidal US policy toward Afghanistan is driven in large measure by Washington's ever more bellicose confrontation with China. The Taliban government has described China, with which Afghanistan shares a narrow border, as its "most important partner" and a "dependable friend."

Cut off from aid and the country's reserves by Washington and its allies, the Taliban sees China as potentially filling the vacuum, including through investments connected to its Belt and Road Initiative.

Chinese investment in the country increased by nearly 12 percent in 2020, and Beijing has interest in exploiting Afghanistan's rare earth metals, estimated at between 1 and 3 trillion dollars in value. The Chinese media Wednesday attributed a fall in the price of stocks connected to lithium to the prospect that exploitation of Afghanistan's lithium reserves, the largest in the world, would bring down the price of the mineral, which is key to the development of China's electric car industry.

After waging a two-decade dirty war that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives before ending in a debacle, Washington is embarked on policies that threaten to condemn millions of Afghans to starvation, while turning the ravaged country into a battlefield in a US war against China.

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