Afghanistan earthquake exposes disaster caused by decades of US occupation

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A 6.1-magnitude earthquake in a remote area of Afghanistan has killed at least 1,000 people and injured at least 1,500. While the worst affected area is the mountainous Paktika province, deaths have also been reported in the eastern provinces of Khost and Nangarhar. Many more bodies are thought to be buried in mud as heavy rain hampers rescue efforts.

The quake is the deadliest since 2002, when a 6.1 magnitude tremor killed about 1,000 people in the north of the country. It struck early Wednesday morning about 30 miles southwest of Khost, southeast of the capital Kabul, according to the United States Geological Survey. Its relatively shallow depth of six miles worsened its impact, with "strong and long jolts" felt in Kabul and tremors felt as far away as Lahore in Pakistan, 300 miles from the epicentre.

Thousands have been forced to sleep outside in unseasonable, near-freezing temperatures, as entire villages, largely built from clay and straw, have collapsed. The severely limited infrastructure in the country is making it very difficult to provide relief. Afghanistan's skeleton health care system is unable to cope under normal circumstances, let alone handle the natural disasters that plague the country. With few airworthy planes and helicopters, the government had to call off the emergency search and rescue after 24 hours and issue an urgent appeal for international aid.

These appalling conditions are the result of the catastrophic encounter of Afghanistan with American imperialism. This began in 1979 with the intervention of the Carter administration and the CIA to finance and arm Islamic fundamentalists, including Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, in a proxy war against the Soviet-backed government.

US imperialism believed it could use the Stalinist bureaucracy's dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 as an opportunity to overcome its economic decline abroad

and its social conflicts at home, using its military might to oversee a "New World Order" in the interests of its corporate and financial elite.

In October 2001, following the attacks of September 11, the United States launched a war and occupation, undertaken in pursuit of economic interests concealed from the public under the guise of the "war on terrorism" against a government it claimed was harbouring bin Laden.

The human and social costs of the war in Afghanistan have been catastrophic and are ongoing today. According to official figures that undoubtedly understate the casualties, 164,436 Afghans were killed during the war, together with 2,448 US soldiers, 3,846 US military contractors and 1,144 soldiers from other NATO countries. Hundreds of thousands of Afghans and tens of thousands of NATO personnel were wounded. The war and occupation have cost the American public some $2 trillion, with a further $6.5 trillion to be paid out in interest payments over the years.

The war has produced one of the largest refugee populations in the world. As of the beginning of this year, before the war in Ukraine, about 1 in 10 Afghans—that is, 3 million people—are refugees, mostly living in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. Three in four Afghans have suffered internal or external displacement in their lifetime.

According to the World Bank, Afghanistan is the sixth poorest country in the world, with a gross national income per capita of only $500. The United Nations estimates that 23 million Afghans, or more than half of the population, suffer from acute hunger. An estimated 8.7 million are at risk of famine, while 5 million children are on the brink of starvation. And this is before the surge in the prices of basic commodities over the past several months.

The Afghan war, bizarrely named Operation Enduring Freedom, spawned a whole new lexicon of criminal

activities: extraordinary rendition, Guantanamo Bay, drone warfare and waterboarding, to mention but a few.

It was WikiLeaks publisher and journalist Julian Assange, who, by publishing the Afghan war logs in 2010, a vast trove of leaked US military documents, brought to the world's attention evidence of the criminality of the war. The Afghan war logs exposed the myth that the occupation of Afghanistan was a "good war," supposedly waged to defeat terrorism, extend democracy, and protect women's rights.

They revealed the mass killings of civilians by both US and UK forces, the underreporting and cover-up of civilian deaths and war crimes, including numerous occasions when US and British troops opened fire on civilians. But not one of the criminals responsible for the war has been prosecuted, much less punished. Instead, it is Assange who has languished in London's maximum security Belmarsh Prison for the last three years, awaiting extradition to the US on charges under the Espionage Act that carry 175 years in prison.

Afghanistan's plight has been further exacerbated by Washington's theft of Afghanistan's financial assets and imposition on the country of an economic blockade—tantamount to starving the country to death—after the Taliban took control last summer amid the US military's humiliating withdrawal from its longest-ever war.

The White House left the country in ruins and facing an enormous humanitarian catastrophe. Throughout the 20 years of occupation, the US and its allies did nothing to develop Afghanistan. Instead, its economy was shattered, its agriculture undermined by so-called aid. This, along with the insecurity, drought and natural disasters, played into the hands of Afghanistan's warlords and drug dealers, as impoverished farmers turned to poppy cultivation and the opium trade.

The disastrous state of Afghanistan underscores the devastating impact of US imperialism's four decades of covert operations, war, and occupation on what was already one of the poorest countries on the planet. It must serve as a warning to workers throughout the world about what the US and NATO have in store for Ukraine.

In her last piece for the *New York Times*, published on February 23, the late Madeleine Albright, US secretary of state under President Bill Clinton from 1997 until 2001, warned—as did several other commentators—that if Russia invaded Ukraine, "It would be far from a repeat of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014; it would be a scenario reminiscent of the Soviet Union's ill-fated occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s."

She was referring to the US's use of proxy forces during the 1980s, supported, hosted, and trained by Pakistan and funded by the US and Saudi Arabia, to unseat the Soviet Union-aligned Afghan government and undermine Moscow's influence in the Caspian basin and the Persian Gulf. Afghanistan itself is a treasure trove of untapped minerals, variously estimated at $1 to $3 trillion.

In the conflicts and mass destruction that followed the collapse of the pro-Soviet regime, the Taliban was nurtured and brought to power with Washington's blessing in the belief that the Taliban would help stabilize Afghanistan after 15 years of war, while at the same time exert increasing pressure on China and Russia.

Albright's words should be taken seriously. In 1996, when she was US ambassador to the United Nations, she was asked by the "60 Minutes" news show whether she thought about the price to the Iraqi people of the devastating sanctions imposed by the US on Iraq following the 1991 Gulf War, which had starved Iraq of medicines and food and killed at least 500,000 Iraqi children at that time. Albright replied, without disputing the figure, "We think the price is worth it."

After two decades of US-backed proxy wars and military occupation, Afghanistan has been brutalized and impoverished. Its fate is a warning for what US imperialism holds in store for everything it touches, whether its nominal "allies" or the targets of US regime-change operations.

With the ever-expanding US war against Russia, the US is preparing to bring the type of devastation wrought upon Afghanistan and Iraq to Europe, at an even greater cost in lives and treasure.

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