

Afghanistan: Killing fields

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*The Taliban's Tet has begun. Interpret Laura Bush's clarion call "to stand by Afghanistan" as you will, says **Eric Walberg***

Two landmarks in Afghanistan last week — British troop deaths surpassed 100, and monthly official coalition deaths now outnumber official coalition deaths in Iraq. Pentagon officials said that in May, 16 coalition troops were killed in Iraq, 14 of them American, while 18 coalition troops were killed in Afghanistan, 13 of them American.

Two more events made the news last week, noteworthy only in their predictability. Afghan President Hamid Karzai attended a donors conference in Paris, where he sought \$50 billion. The US and friends offered \$17 billion, though more than half of the pledge total came from a previous US commitment of \$10.2 billion, i.e., Karzai's net is \$6.8 billion, which given past practice, he shouldn't hold his breath waiting for. US First Lady Laura Bush showed slides from her trip to Kabul to visit Karzai and support Afghan women. Leaders echoed her call "to stand by Afghanistan". Sarkozy, as usual, confused everyone by saying, "We cannot give in to torturers." Laura announced that Washington will spend \$80 million to support the American University in Kabul and the National Literacy Centre, to capture the hearts and minds of the people.

A note of realism was heard when officials complained that Karzai seemed to be unable to crack down on corruption and drug trafficking, even in Kabul, where he is virtually imprisoned in his heavily barricaded presidential palace. Karzai assured them that his government would take strides to root out corruption. Perhaps he could start by replacing his brother Wali Karzai, the president of Kandahar's provincial council, who along with Hamid is widely believed to be involved in the very drug trafficking he so passionately denounced to his donors. Afghan officials recreated an air of surrealism by complaining that donors have been too skittish about letting Afghanistan take control of its own destiny and controlling how the money is spent. Yes, give tens of billions to corrupt cronies of Karzai. That would be sure to turn things around.

The other meeting, even more tedious and fruitless, lacking Laura's slides, was a two-day session of NATO defence ministers following a now-familiar script in the debate over Afghanistan: US Defense Secretary Robert Gates unsuccessfully harangued unwilling allies to pledge more troops for the slaughter. Britain volunteered 230, with Des Browne, the British defense secretary, hailing the Afghan campaign as "the noble cause of the 21st century".

The big complaint these days is the dastardly Pakistanis, providing "safe haven" for the even more dastardly Taliban. The answer from NATO came this week with a deadly air strike

on a Pakistani Frontier Corps border checkpoint, which, according to Pakistani Prime Minister Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani, killed 11 Pakistani soldiers — Pakistan Muslim League MP Amir Muqam said as many as 70. This act of “self defence” is yet another in NATO’s long history of “friendly fire” deaths, surely the oxymoron of all times. NATO forces have launched several air strikes inside Pakistan over the past year but this is the first time it has killed Pakistani soldiers. Without so much as batting an eye, Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, proceeded to demand of the helpless Pakistani government not only the expulsion of all Al-Qaeda but also an immediate halt to the flow of insurgents across the border. Lapdog Karzai even threatened to send Afghan troops in: “They come and kill Afghans and coalition troops; it precisely gives us the right to do the same.”

But I’ve left out the really spectacular news, the attack by Taliban militants on the main prison in southern Afghanistan late Friday, exploding a car bomb at the main gate in a multi-pronged assault that freed over 1000 prisoners, including 400 suspected Taliban. The complex attack included a car bomb, suicide bombers who entered the prison, and rockets fired from outside it. “All the prisoners escaped. There is no one left,” said Kandahar President Wali Karzai. Many of the prisoners were on a hunger strike only a few weeks ago during which 47 stitched their mouths shut. Some had been held without trial for more than two years and others were given lengthy prison sentences after short trials. The Taliban went on to liberate 18 nearby villages in an area that Canadian troops supposedly hold and plan to showcase with development aid over the next four years. Good luck, Canucks.

This blow to the occupation can only be compared to the Vietcong’s Tet offensive against the US occupation of South Vietnam in 1968. When will the occupation wake up and realise these brave and fearless men are dying defending their homeland? “I ask the Canadian people to ask their government to stop their destructive and inhumane mission and withdraw your troops. Our war will continue as long as your occupation forces are in our land,” Taliban spokesman Yousuf Ahmadi appealed.

Perhaps the freed jail space in Kandahar will obviate the need for a \$60 million upgrade of the jail at the infamous Bagram base, dubbed Afghanistan’s very own Guantanamo. “There will be a great deal of improvement in the quality of life,” US Army spokeswoman Lieutenant Colonel Rumi Nielson-Green said. “There will be a lot more floor space and much more room for communal activities, which is part of their culture.” Plans for the new prison apparently came as a complete surprise to Afghan officials in the Afghan Ministry of Justice.

In the current jail, two detainees were killed after being repeatedly struck by their American guards. There have been numerous allegations of abuse at the facility, with prisoners claiming to have been sexually humiliated, beaten, stripped naked and thrown down stairs during their interrogations. Nielson-Green, however, denies that detainees at Bagram have been ill-treated. I shudder to think what Nielson-Green considers to be “ill treatment”.

Until September 2004, Bagram served largely as a way station for prisoners on the way to the real Guantanamo. US officials deny allegations that children as young as nine have been imprisoned at the facility. Speaking of sexual abuse, Canadian troops have recently been under fire for their “don’t look, don’t tell” policy with regards widespread sexual abuse of civilians by Afghan government troops the Canadians are training.

But enough of this. The pre- and post-9/11 smoke and mirrors about Afghanistan are finally dispersing and shattering. NATO is in Afghanistan, as US President George Bush said in Bucharest in April, as “an expeditionary alliance that is sending its forces across the world to

help secure a future of freedom and peace for millions.” In other words to invade countries the US disapproves of and murder anyone who resists. A total withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, a negotiated settlement between Afghan forces, and massive reparations by NATO countries is what the world must urgently demand.

Putting the blame on Pakistan is the same story we hear about Iran in Iraq and heard during the US war against Vietnam, when Nixon began bombing Cambodia. It did not help the US defeat the Vietnamese but did result in the Khmer Rouge taking over Cambodia. Only by killing virtually the entire population will the US plan for Afghanistan succeed. Is this the objective?

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Canadian Eric Walberg is known worldwide as a journalist specializing in the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia. A graduate of University of Toronto and Cambridge in economics, he has been writing on East-West relations since the 1980s. He has lived in both the Soviet Union and Russia, and then Uzbekistan, as a UN adviser, writer, translator and lecturer. Presently a writer for the foremost Cairo newspaper, Al Ahram, he is also a regular contributor to Counterpunch, Dissident Voice, Global Research, Al-Jazeera and Turkish Weekly, and is a commentator on Voice of the Cape radio. Eric Walberg was a moderator and speaker at the Leaders for Change Summit in Istanbul in 2011.

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