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Afghans protest Washington's starvation strategy

Protesters have marched through the streets of Kabul over the past weeks demanding that the United States lift its financial blockade and end its illegal seizure of Afghanistan's financial assets, which together are driving an economic meltdown in Asia's most impoverished country.

Women marched on December 29 carrying banners reading "Don't kill us by hunger", "Let us live" and "Joe Biden! The weather is very cold, and my children don't have anything to eat at home." A similar protest was held on January 2, and more are planned in both Kabul and other Afghan cities.

With its vindictive sanctions policies, Washington threatens to kill more Afghans by means of starvation over the coming months than it slaughtered in the 20 years of US war and occupation that ended in August.



Over one million children are at risk of dying over the winter. (Twitter)

With a cold winter setting in, the entire country is teetering on the brink of famine. “One million children [under the age of five] are so malnourished they are on the risk of dying in the coming months,” the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) warned last month.

The United Nations reports that just 2 percent of Afghanistan’s population has enough to eat. Twenty-three million people are confronting extreme hunger, while official statistics place 90 percent of the population below the abysmally low poverty line.

Mary-Ellen McGroarty, head of the World Food Program in Afghanistan, describes the country as “on the brink” of famine. “There is no province in Afghanistan today with less than 30 percent of their population either in crisis or emergency food insecurity,” she said recently.

Hospitals and feeding centers are seeing a doubling and even tripling of severely malnourished children brought in by desperate parents.

The country’s health care system is also on the brink of collapse as the spread of the Omicron variant makes a new surge in the COVID-19 pandemic inevitable. Nearly half of the country’s hospitals equipped to treat COVID patients have shut down in recent months, while the only remaining one for Kabul’s 4 million inhabitants cannot pay its staff, lacks basic medicines and supplies and is unable even to purchase diesel fuel to run generators used to produce the oxygen needed to save lives.

There are deepening concerns over the ominous threat of winter's onset for Afghanistan's hungry masses. Winter poses the additional danger of mountainous areas of Afghanistan being cut off by heavy snow, leaving whole populations without food or access to assistance. Eloi Fillion, the head of an ICRC delegation that was in Kabul on Tuesday, tweeted, "Heavy snow in Kabul today. Temperature might drop to -9 this week." Fillion said that he had been told that people were "burning furniture, shoes or tyres to keep warm," adding, "Due to economic collapse, thousands of Afghans are left with nothing to cope with increasing challenges."



Protesters in Kabul demand US release Afghanistan's assets. (Twitter)

The Red Cross official left unstated the source of this "economic collapse." Afghanistan's population has long faced poverty and hunger, which have been exacerbated by a severe drought. The abrupt withdrawal of US troops and resulting collapse of the corrupt puppet regime put in place by the US occupation deprived the country of its main sources of income. Foreign aid accounted for 50 percent of Afghanistan's gross domestic product and 75 percent of the government's budget, while the massive sums spent on the US war itself, much of it funneling into the hands of contractors and government officials, underpinned the corrupt and unstable economic setup. All of that has come to an end.

But there is no question that the overriding cause of the Afghan economy's collapse is the US sanctions regime. Washington seamlessly transferred sanctions imposed on the Taliban as a "terrorist" organization during the period in which it was organizing an insurgency against the US occupation to the Afghan government itself, once Kabul fell to the Islamist movement on August 15.

Treating the government of a country of 39 million people and all of its agencies as a “foreign terrorist organization,” Washington has frozen nearly \$10 billion in Afghanistan’s foreign currency reserves held in the US, in effect stealing them from the country in violation of international law. The action has choked off the flow of cash, meaning that the minority of the population with jobs are going unpaid and those with bank savings are unable to access their money. Businesses are unable to purchase supplies or meet payrolls and are shutting down.

The “terrorist” sanctions have likewise paralyzed dealings between the Afghan central bank and local banks and businesses, on the one hand, and international banks and corporate entities on the other. The end result is the scuttling of deals to import food, medicine and other essential supplies. Remittances sent by Afghan emigres to their families have also been cut off, along with funds to pay employees of those relief agencies still on the ground.

The US has used its overriding influence within the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Asian Development Bank to ensure that they abide by the American financial blockade.

Washington has glibly claimed that it has carved out exemptions from its sanctions regime for humanitarian assistance, but, as in the case of Iran and other countries targeted by such punitive measures, the sanctions are so sweeping and threatening that few financial or corporate entities have any interest in tempting fate by entering into dealings with Afghanistan’s government.

The Biden administration’s hard line on Afghanistan sanctions and its refusal to provide any assurances that it will not penalize banks or corporations entering into deals with the country’s government has been widely attributed to political concerns over showing any weakness in the wake of the chaotic US withdrawal completed at the end of August.

While such base political motives no doubt play a role, along with imperialist vindictiveness toward a population that forced an ignominious end to America’s longest war, Washington’s homicidal policy toward Afghanistan is driven by definite strategic aims and conceptions.

More than four decades ago, Washington launched Operation Cyclone, the largest in the CIA's history, arming and financing mujahideen Islamist guerrillas in Afghanistan. The aim, cloaked in rhetoric about "freedom" and "democracy," was to draw the Soviet Union into "its own Vietnam," as former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski put it. The ensuing decades of war claimed the lives of millions.

In October 2001, the US invaded Afghanistan under the pretext of a "war on terror" against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Washington's aim was to consolidate a client regime in a strategic country of Central Asia—home to the second largest proven reserves of petroleum and natural gas in the world—and on the borders of China, Iran and the former Soviet Union.

The same essential motivations can be detected in current US policy, couched by the Biden administration and its Secretary of State Antony Blinken in the hypocritical rhetoric of "human rights." Washington has no intention of allowing China, Russia and Iran to fill the vacuum left by the US/NATO military withdrawal from Afghanistan.

According to the *Financial Times*, China has "expanded its presence" in Afghanistan since the fall of the US puppet regime, "with business groups exploring the country's vast reserves of minerals like lithium and striking deals to buy agricultural products."

US imperialism's scorched earth sanctions policies serve to disrupt such economic ties and to create a crisis on China's border, including the potential threat of renewed terrorist operations by Islamist Uyghur separatists.

At the same time, Pentagon officials have unveiled plans to resume drone missile strikes in Afghanistan, ostensibly aimed at Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K), a group that even the former Afghan puppet leader Hamid Karzai believes was brought into Afghanistan by the CIA. It has carried out a series of terrorist attacks aimed against the Taliban regime. Renewed US bombings will further destabilize the country.

Washington's policies in Afghanistan are bound up with its broader preparations for war with its main strategic rival, China. If a million Afghan children die in the bargain, they will be seen, just like the tens of thousands of kids killed in US bombing raids and drone attacks, as collateral damage.

While ignoring the demands of the protesters in Kabul to release assets that could stem mass famine, the US State Department last week announced the appointment of a “Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights.” The appointee, Rina Amiri, served as an aide to the late former US special envoy on Afghanistan Richard Holbrooke, providing “human rights” window-dressing for the Obama administration’s military “surge.”

Amiri will beat the women’s rights drum to justify Washington’s murderous policy. A key propaganda point will center on the right of girls to attend school. This as Washington’s financial stranglehold is preventing teachers from being paid and forcing the closure of schools throughout the country, even as the children who would have attended them are starving to death.

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