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US steals billions in Afghan bank funds

In an action that combines brazen theft, imperialist brutality and unlimited hypocrisy, the Biden administration announced Friday that it will seize control of \$7 billion in Afghanistan financial assets, held largely at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, rather than return them to the Afghanistan central bank.

Media attention has largely been devoted to Biden's splitting of the \$7 billion, with \$3.5 billion set aside to meet the legal claims of survivors of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and \$3.5 billion to be used for "humanitarian aid" to the people of Afghanistan. Both actions are cynical diversions from what is an effort to starve the country and avenge the humiliating defeat which US imperialism suffered last summer.



A Taliban fighter stands guard in front of people waiting to enter a bank, in Kabul, Afghanistan, Sunday, Feb. 13, 2022. (AP Photo/Hussein Malla)

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The \$3.5 billion supposedly to be used for aid will not be available for many months, if ever, as State Department officials acknowledged over the weekend, ensuring that nothing will reach the starving population of Afghanistan during the winter months. According to the UN World Food Program, some 23 million Afghans face hunger and malnutrition this year, while UNICEF warns that as many as one million Afghan children could die of severe malnutrition and outright starvation.

The delay is due to the administration's decision to allow legal claims against the Taliban amounting to \$7 billion, awarded by default in a court proceeding nearly a decade ago, to go forward. Some of the plaintiffs are likely to challenge the 50-50 split in Afghan bank funds, which could tie up any allocation more or less indefinitely.

That appears to be the real purpose of the Biden decision: to allow millions to suffer and starve in Afghanistan, while claiming to be above the battle. "It's all up to the courts," Biden will declare, washing his hands of the spectacle of mass death in Central Asia, just as he has facilitated mass death in the COVID pandemic.

In addition, by refusing to return any portion of the \$7 billion to the central bank of Afghanistan, the Biden administration intensifies its vengeful wrecking operation against the Afghan economy. Without a functioning central bank—and outright collapse is now a distinct possibility now that its main reserves have been confiscated—Afghan banks and businesses cannot function, workers cannot be paid, no international corporation will do business with the country, and few aid organizations will be able to operate.

Afghan-American groups and aid groups overwhelmingly condemned the action, pointing particularly to the impact on the overall economy. It is not the lack of aid, in itself, but the inability of the economy to function which is the principal cause of mass suffering in Afghanistan.

The message to the Afghan people is clear. As long as you are ruled by the Taliban, you will starve. It is not necessary for American imperialism to bomb the country back to the Stone Age, as military warmongers threatened in Vietnam. They can do so by cutting off all credit and international commerce to a country they have already bombed for 20 years.

The Biden action is illegal on a number of levels. Even the *Washington Post*, which published an editorial enthusiastically supporting the decision, had to acknowledge that the White House position is self-contradictory: The Biden administration refuses to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan; at the same time, it authorizes the use of Afghan national bank resources to pay off a legal judgment against the Taliban.

The invocation of 9/11 is particularly monstrous and cynical. As numerous commentators in Afghanistan, Pakistan and internationally have pointed out, none of the 9/11 hijackers hailed from Afghanistan. Most were Saudis, citizens of a country that is the closest US Arab ally and the recipient of hundreds of billions in US arms sales.

Even if one accepts, for the sake of argument, the claim that the Taliban protected Osama bin Laden against US government demands for his surrender, there is no evidence that the Taliban had foreknowledge of the 9/11 attacks. More fundamentally, why should the people of Afghanistan be punished for this, on top of 20 years of US conquest and occupation, which have left their country in ruins?

It is particularly cynical to suggest that Afghan children not even born on September 11, 2001 should suffer because of the actions of terrorists like bin Laden, a Saudi multi-millionaire who began his career fighting in the CIA-backed *mujahadeen* war against Soviet troops. The US military-intelligence apparatus had far closer connections to Al Qaeda than anyone in Afghanistan, and these connections resumed in 2011 when the Islamists served as the CIA's ground troops in Libya and Syria.

The Taliban government in Kabul denounced the Biden decision. "The theft and seizure of money held/frozen by the United States of the Afghan people represents the lowest level of human and moral decay of a country and a nation," Taliban spokesman Mohammad Naeem said on Twitter.

Faiz Mohammad, a Kabul resident, made another critical point in an interview with Iran's Press TV. "First, I don't think the US has the right to use Afghanistan's money to compensate 9/11 victims," he said. "The US had no reason when it attacked us, but a lot of people died in the past 20 years. So, it's the US that should compensate us, and they should not spend our money."

There is no doubt an additional consideration in the White House action: the pressure of the fascist right, which is uppermost in Biden's political calculations. Releasing even a small portion of Afghanistan's assets will come under fire from Fox News, Breitbart, Donald Trump, and the bulk of the Republican Party. "After the surrender to the Taliban, comes the payment of tribute": the script for know-nothings like Tucker Carlson almost writes itself.

Similar charges were made about the Iran nuclear pact, where the release of a fraction of Iran's own assets, held in foreign bank accounts that handle payments for oil exports, was portrayed as "paying tribute to the ayatollahs."

So, to protect his right flank, Biden invokes the scarecrow of 9/11. White House officials claimed that a lawsuit by 9/11 survivors and relatives required action on Afghan assets by February 11 because of a court-imposed deadline, but this is a transparent pretext.

More than 20 years after 9/11, a tragedy that has never been fully investigated because connections with the Saudi monarchy and the US military-intelligence apparatus had to be covered up, the deaths of nearly 3,000 Americans is still utilized to serve the interests of the American ruling class.

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