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## Cowardice and Exoneration in Kunduz

By Robert Koehler  
May 6, 2016

“The people are being reduced to blood and dust. They are in pieces.”

The doctor who uttered these words still thought the hospital itself was a safe zone. He was with Doctors Without Borders, working in Kunduz, Afghanistan, where the Taliban and government forces were engaged in hellish fighting and civilians, as always, were caught in the middle. The wounded, including children, had been flowing in all week, and the staff were unrelieved in their duties, working an unending shift.

Their week ended at 2 a.m. last Oct. 3 when – as the world knows – a U.S. AC-130 gunship began strafing the hospital, the crew apparently acting on the mistaken belief that this was a Taliban compound. The strike lasted for an hour, continuing even though the humanitarian organization contacted the Pentagon to plead that it stop.

A total of 211 shells hit the hospital. The Intensive Care Unit was wiped out. Every patient in the unit except for a 3-year-old girl was killed, some burning to death in their beds. A total of 42 people – patients, staff and doctors – died because of this lethal mistake.

One of the dead was Dr. Osmani, the young doctor quoted above, who had just begun ophthalmology training in Kabul but still worked at the MSF facility in Kunduz on weekends, according to an eyewitness account by Kathleen Thomas, another doctor there, an Australian, who survived.

“Our colleagues didn’t die peacefully like in the movies,” she wrote last month in *The Guardian*. “They died painfully, slowly, some of them screaming out for help that never came, alone and terrified, knowing the extent of their own injuries and aware of their impending death. Countless other staff and patients were injured; limbs blown off, shrapnel rocketed through them, burns, pressure-wave injuries of the lungs, eyes and ears. Many of these injuries have left permanent disability. It was a scene of nightmarish horror that will be forever etched in my mind.”

Some mistake.

This is all news again, of course, because the US government, having investigated the incident, has just released a 3,000-page, mostly classified report, uh, exonerating itself. This comes as no surprise.

Well, it admitted the bombing was an unfortunate mistake and 16 military personnel involved in the incident have received “administrative actions” as punishment. Also, since the tragedy, the US has made “condolence payments” to the victims: \$6,000 to families of the dead, \$3,000 to the injured.

It seems to me all this requires a moment or two of profound silence, as we try to absorb both the tragedy and the absurdity of these events, which unite in a sort of horrific shrug of indifference to the predictable consequences of war.

The *New York Times*, for instance, informs us: “Still, the release of the investigation’s findings and the announcement of the disciplinary measures were unlikely to satisfy Doctors Without Borders and other human rights groups, which on Friday reiterated their calls for an independent criminal investigation.”

Of course Doctors Without Borders will not be “satisfied” with these findings, as though, my God, any finding or any action whatsoever by the US military – gosh, the payout of six grand per dead Afghan or the stern punishment (a scolding?) of a few scapegoats – could bring balance and resolution to the horror Kathleen Thomas describes. Just the use of that word – “satisfied” – trivializes the infliction of suffering, whether intentional or merely recklessly accidental, beyond comprehension.

But this is the language of war, as spoken by those who wage it and those who uncritically report it: a language of implicit moral relativism.

The same *Times* story, describing the report’s account of what happened, explained: “The aircrew appeared to be confused by the directions from the Americans on the ground in the minutes leading up to the attack. At one point, the crew was told it would need to hit a second target after the strike it was about to commence, and ‘we will also be doing the same thing of softening the target for partner forces,’ that is, Afghans.”

This is the reality: An action that wound up killing 42 hospital workers and patients –men, women and children, some of whom were burned alive in their beds – was instigated in order to

“soften the target” . . . which is nothing less than linguistic exoneration of murder. Or rather, pre-exoneration.

And this is war. This is what the United States allots 54 percent of its annual discretionary spending – some \$600 billion – to perpetuate. I’m quite certain this money would be unspendable, and the game called war would be unplayable, if it weren’t for the linguistic pre-exoneration that removes all humanity from those who will die (think: collateral damage) and all responsibility from those who will kill.

But with the exoneration solidly in place, anything goes. Every side in war plays with the instruments of hell. The *Times* also recently reported that the war zone hospitals everywhere are more vulnerable than they’ve ever been and the “rules of war” seem to be in tatters.

Maybe this is because war can’t be contained by “rules.”

For instance, not only have there been six attacks on hospitals in Aleppo, Syria – perpetrated by both government and rebel forces – in the past week, but also: “In 11 of the world’s war zones, between 2011 and 2014, the International Committee of the Red Cross tallied nearly 2,400 acts of violence against those who were trying to provide health care. That works out to two attacks a day.”

What might “satisfy” Doctors Without Borders or the maimed and grieving victims of the Kunduz tragedy? In my view, nothing less than an American commitment to global demilitarization.

This is called atonement.