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Hunger and Anger in Afghanistan

By Kathy Kelly

December 10, 2010

The Obama administration has announced the imminent release of a December Review which will evaluate the U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan. The military has yet to disclose what the specific categories for evaluation will be. Yet many people in Afghanistan might wish that hunger along with their anger over attacks against civilians could top the list.

In Afghanistan, a nation where 850 children die every day, about a quarter of the population goes hungry. The UN says that 7.4 million Afghans live with hunger and fear of starvation, while millions more rely on food help, and one in five children die before the age of five.

"Do you think we like to live this way?" an Afghan man asked me, last October, as he led us toward a primitive tent encampment on the outskirts of Kabul. "Do you see how we live? The cold and the rain are coming. How will we protect our children?" He flicked his forefinger on a weather-beaten blanket covering a tent. The blanket immediately ripped.

Standing next to him was a man who quietly handed me three crumpled photos, never lifting his eyes from the ground. The spokesperson identified the man as his cousin. The first picture showed his cousin's ruined home. A U.S. aerial bombardment had destroyed the dwelling. The next pictures were of two bloodied children. "All of his children were killed," the spokesperson said. "All his family, his wife, his five children, by an attack from the air." He went on to explain that they had been goat herders in the

San Gin province of Afghanistan. They were happy with their lives, selling yoghurt and fattening their animals. A Taliban fighter had come to their village at night. The U.S. apparently wanted to kill this fighter, but instead they destroyed his cousin's family. "We couldn't stay there," the spokesperson said, pointing to a picture of the debris that was once his cousin's home. "We were afraid we might be hit again, so all of us left. We are four families."

Inside one of the tents, a young mother welcomed me to sit down on the only available cushion. It appeared that they slept on the ground. The families share one pot over a fire pit, and a few utensils. They also have access to a water pump. Near their area is a tent where they join for prayers, and also one that is used for classes. One man begged us to tell the authorities that they have no medicines in the camp and that many of the children are ill.

Days earlier, in a far more comfortable setting, students at the Bamiyan University, located in the central, mountainous province of Bamiyan, had prodded us to comprehend their anger. In a straw poll, several dozen were unanimous in stating that they want the U.S. to leave their country. Several insisted that most U.S. people don't understand or care about the impact of U.S. warfare in Afghanistan. An engineering student held up a copy of the *Time* magazine cover which showed a young Afghan woman whose nose was horribly mutilated, allegedly as punishment for defying men in her family. *Time's* accompanying headline announced that the story would explain why U.S. troops must remain in Afghanistan. "Do Americans care more about noses than fingers?" the student asked. "Who will cover the stories about fingers that are cut off?!" I felt embarrassed not to know what he was talking about. Several weeks later, I read a *New York Times* article about a trial taking place at an army base in Washington State. The article shed light on the student's question. A U.S. Staff Sergeant from the 5th Stryker Combat Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division was charged with leading a conspiracy to randomly target and kill unarmed Afghan civilians. He and four other soldiers faced murder charges. The staff sergeant is alleged to have planted evidence to cover up the murders and to have carved fingers off corpses which he kept as war souvenirs.

Although the U.S. military forbids soldiers to mutilate corpses and go on killing sprees that target civilians, the U.S. occupying forces in Afghanistan have bragged, in recent weeks, about increased capacities to kill with ever more invulnerable weapons. A company of 16 Abrams tanks was recently delivered to Afghanistan. "We've taken the gloves off," said an unnamed U.S. military official, "and it has had huge impact." (*Washington Post*, November 19, 2010) The 68-ton tanks fire high explosive, white phosphorus and anti-personnel shells that can destroy a house a mile away. Each tank costs 4.3 million dollars and uses 3 gallons of jet fuel per mile.

The Pentagon is also sending 12,500 XM25 Individual Air Burst Weapons to Afghanistan, one to each infantry squad and Special Forces team in Afghanistan. The XM25 gun can fire a projectile that will travel the length of eight football fields. "When fired, the projectile is designed to explode directly above a target," says the *Army Times*, "raining shrapnel down on an enemy crouched behind cover."

In a report to the November 2010 NATO conference held in Lisbon, 29 aid groups working in Afghanistan warned that the increases in air attacks, the use of night raids, and the destruction of civilian property contributes to "rapidly deteriorating" security for most Afghans and a rise in civilian casualties. People who flee from U.S. attacks face food insecurity, loss of income, lack of health care, and homelessness. The aid groups' report is entitled "Nowhere to Turn." Increasingly, Afghans living in war zones have nowhere to hide.

Commenting on impoverishment and displacement caused by military offensives, a Pakistani op-ed recently compared hunger and anger to two live wires. When the wires touch, they create an incandescent and uncontrollable flash.

It's hard to imagine the extent of explosive popular rage that would result if the shoe were on the other foot, if U.S. people were subject to aerial bombing, night raids, destruction of civilian homes, displacement and starvation. In reality, the live wires of hunger and anger could exist in our lives too; we could be angry, very angry, about this war, angry enough to make it a political issue. But if our hunger were for an end to the war, if our hunger even signaled a desire to rethink and repent our murderous policies, if we honestly sought forgiveness from Afghan civilians who've borne the brunt of our war of choice, then perhaps an uncontrollable and incandescent flash of fairness and peace could govern our future.