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Kathy Kelly and Maya Evans walk with children at the Chamin-E-Babrak refugee camp in Kabul, Afghanistan, January 2014. (Abdulhai Darya)



by Kathy Kelly

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Editor's note: *Kathy Kelly, a co-founder of Voices in the Wilderness, renamed Voices for Creative Nonviolence, is a peace activist who, from the start of the first Gulf War in 1991, has traveled to U.S. war zones. From Baghdad and Basra in Iraq to Kabul in Afghanistan, she sought to bridge the language of enemies and counter the violence with personal witness, often writing accounts that countered the misleading appraisals of U.S. officials. In light of the recent release of the Afghanistan Papers, NCR asked if she would reflect on her experience of America's "forever wars."*

The 2003 "shock and awe" bombing of Iraq had finally stopped. From the balcony of my room in Baghdad's Al Fanar Hotel, I watched U.S. Marines moving between their jeeps, armored personnel carriers, and Humvees. They had occupied the street immediately in front of the small, family-owned hotel where our Iraq Peace Team had been living for the past six months. Looking upward, a U.S. Marine could see enlarged vinyl photos of beautiful Iraqi children strung across balconies of our fifth-floor rooms. We silently stood on those balconies when the U.S. Marines arrived in Baghdad, holding signs that said "War = Terror" and "Courage for Peace, Not for War." When she first saw the Marine's faces, Cynthia Banas commented on how young and tired they seemed. Wearing her "War Is Not the Answer" T-shirt, she headed down the stairs to offer them bottled water.

From my balcony, I saw Cathy Breen, also a member of the Iraq Peace Team, kneeling on a large canvas artwork entrusted to us by friends from South Korea. It depicts people suffering from war. Above the people, like a sinister cloud, is a massive heap of weapons. We unrolled it the day the Marines arrived and began to "occupy" this space. Marines carefully avoided driving vehicles over it. Sometimes they would converse with us. Below, Cathy read from a small booklet of daily Scripture passages. A U.S. Marine approached her, knelt down, and apparently asked to pray with her. He placed his hands in hers.

April Hurley, of our team, is a doctor. She was greatly needed in the emergency room of a nearby hospital during the bombing. Drivers would only take her there if she was accompanied by someone they had known for a long time, and so I generally accompanied her. I'd often sit on a bench outside the emergency room while traumatized civilians rushed in with wounded and maimed survivors of the

terrifying U.S. aerial bombings. When possible, Cathy Breen and I would take notes at the bedsides of patients, including children, whose bodies had been ripped apart by U.S. bombs.

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The ER scenes were gruesome, bloody and utterly tragic. Yet no less unbearable and incomprehensible were the eerily quiet wards we had visited during trips to Iraq from 1996 to 2003, when Voices in the Wilderness had organized 70 delegations to defy the economic sanctions by bringing medicines and medical relief supplies to hospitals in Iraq. Across the country, Iraqi doctors told us the economic war was far worse than even the 1991 Desert Storm bombing.

In pediatrics wards, we saw infants and toddlers whose bodies were wasted from gastrointestinal diseases, cancers, respiratory infections and starvation. Limp, miserable, sometimes gasping for breath, they lay in the arms of their sorrowful mothers, and seemingly no one could stop the U.S. from punishing them to death. "Why?" mothers murmured. Sanctions forbade Iraq to sell its oil. Without oil revenues, how could they purchase desperately needed goods? Iraq's infrastructure continued to crumble; hospitals became surreal symbols of cruelty where doctors and nurses, bereft of medicines and supplies, couldn't heal their patients or ease their agonies.

In 1995, UN officials estimated that economic sanctions had directly contributed to the deaths of at least a half-million Iraqi children, under age 5.



Kathy Kelly with children in Kabul, Afghanistan, May 2016 (Provided photo)

The economic war continued for nearly 13 harsh and horrible years.

Shortly after the Marines arrived outside of our hotel, we began hearing ominous reports of potential humanitarian crises developing in Baghdad and other major Iraqi cities. A woman who had been in charge of food distribution for her neighborhood, under the "Oil for Food" program, showed us her carefully maintained ledger books and angrily asked how all who had depended on the monthly food basket would now feed their families. Along with food shortages, we heard alarming reports about contaminated water and a possible outbreak of cholera in Basra and Hilla. For weeks, there had been no trash removal. Bombed electrical plants and sanitation facilities had yet to be restored. Iraqis who could help restore the broken infrastructure couldn't make it through multiple check points to reach their offices; with communication centers bombed, they couldn't contact colleagues. If the U.S. military hadn't yet devised a plan for emergency relief, why not temporarily entrust projects to U.N. agencies with long experience of organizing food distribution and health care delivery?

Cathy, who is a nurse, Dr. April Hurley, and Ramzi Kysia, also a member of our group, arranged a meeting with the civil and military operations center, located in the Palestine Hotel, across the street from us. An official there dismissed them as people who didn't belong there. Before telling them to leave, he did accept a list of

our concerns, written on Voices in the Wilderness stationery.

The logo for our stationery reappeared a few hours later, at the entrance to the Palestine Hotel. It was taped to the flap of a cardboard box. Surrounding the logo were seven silver bullets. Written in ball-point pen on the cardboard was a message: "Keep Out."

In response, Ramzi Kysia wrote a press release headlined: "Heavy-handed & Hopeless, The U.S. Military Doesn't Know What It's Doing In Iraq."



Kathy Kelly holds Shoba at the Chamin-E-Babrak refugee camp in Kabul, Afghanistan, in January 2014, a few days after the child had been saved from a burning tent, during a fire that destroyed much of the camp. (Abdulhai Darya)

In 2008, our group, renamed Voices for Creative Nonviolence, was beginning a walk from Chicago to the Republican National Convention in Minneapolis. We asked Imam Abdul Malik Mujahid to speak at a "send-off" event. He encouraged and blessed our

"Witness Against War" walk but then surprised us by saying he had never heard us mention the war in Afghanistan, even though people there suffered terribly from aerial bombings, drone attacks, targeted assassinations, night raids and imprisonments. Returning from our walk, we began researching drone warfare, and then created an "Afghan Atrocities List," on our website, carefully updating it each week with verifiable reports of U.S. attacks against Afghan civilians.

The following year, Joshua Brollier and I headed to Pakistan and then Afghanistan. In Kabul, Afghanistan, we were guests of a deeply respected non-governmental organization Emergency, which has a Surgical Centre for War Victims there.

Filippo, a sturdy young nurse from Italy who was close to completing three terms of service with Emergency, welcomed us. As he filled a huge backpack with medicines and supplies, he described how the hospital personnel managed to reach people in remote villages who have no access to clinics or hospitals. The trip was relatively safe since no one had ever attacked a vehicle marked with the Emergency logo. A driver would take him to one of Emergency's 41 remote first aid clinics. From there, he would hike further up a mountainside and meet villagers awaiting him and the precious medicines he carried. In a previous visit, after he had completed a term in Afghanistan, he said people had walked four hours in the snow to come and say goodbye to him. "Yes," he said, "I fell in love."

How different Filippo's report was from those compiled in our Afghan Atrocities List. The latter tells about U.S. special operations forces, some of the most highly trained warriors in the world, traveling to remote areas, bursting into homes in the middle of the night, and proceeding to lock the women in one room, handcuff or sometimes hogtie the men, rip apart closets, mattresses and furniture, and then take the men to prisons for interrogation. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch filed chilling reports about torture of Afghan prisoners held by the U.S.

In 2010, two U.S. Veterans for Peace, Ann Wright and Mike Ferner, joined me in Kabul. We visited one of the city's largest refugee camps. People faced appalling conditions. Over a dozen, including infants, had frozen to death, their families unable to purchase fuel or adequate blankets. When the rain, sleet and snow came, the tents and huts become mired in mud. Earlier, I had met with a young girl there whose arm had been cut off, her uncle told me, by a U.S. drone attack. Her brother, whose spine was injured, huddled under a blanket, inside their tent, visibly shaking.

Opposite the sprawling refugee camp is a huge U.S. military base. Ann and Mike felt outraged over the terrible contrast between the Afghan refugee camp with a soaring population of people displaced by war, and the U.S. base housing military personnel who had ample supplies of food, water, and fuel.

Most of the funds earmarked by the U.S. for reconstruction in Afghanistan have been used to train and equip Afghan Defense and Security forces. My young friends in the Afghan Peace Volunteers (APV) were weary of war and didn't want military training. Each of them had lost friends and family members because of the war.

In December 2015, I again visited Emergency's Surgical Centre for War Victims in Kabul, joined by several Afghan Peace Volunteers. We donated blood and then visited with hospital personnel. "Are you still treating any victims of the U.S. bombing in Kunduz?" I asked Luca Radaelli, who coordinates Emergency's Afghan facilities. He explained how their Kabul hospital was already full when 91 survivors of the U.S. attack on the Kunduz hospital operated by Médecins Sans Frontières were transported for five hours over rough roads to the closest place they could be treated, this surgical center. The Oct. 15 attack had killed at least 42 people, 14 of whom were hospital staff.

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Kathy Kelly and Voices in the Wilderness delegation with Afghan Peace Volunteer friends in Bamyan, Afghanistan, in 2010 (Hakim Young)

Even though Kunduz hospital staff had immediately notified the U.S. military, the U.N., and the Afghan government that the U.S. was bombing their hospital, the warplane continued bombing the hospital's ER and intensive care unit, in 15-minute

intervals, for an hour and a half.

Luca introduced our small team to Khalid Ahmed, a former pharmacy student at the Kunduz hospital, who was still recovering. Khalid described the terrible night, his attempt to literally run for his life by sprinting toward the front gate, his agony when he was hit by shrapnel in his spine, and his efforts to reassemble his cell phone — guards had cautioned him to remove the batteries so that he wouldn't be detected by aerial surveillance — so that he could give a last message to his family, as he began to lose consciousness. Fortunately, his call got through. His father's relatives raced to the hospital's front gate and found Khalid in a nearby ditch, unconscious but alive.

Telling his story, Khalid asked the Afghan Peace Volunteers about me. Learning I'm from the U.S., his eyes widened. "Why would your people want to do this to us?" he asks. "We were only trying to help people."

Images of battered and destroyed hospitals in Iraq and Afghanistan, and of hospital personnel trying nevertheless to heal people and save lives, help me retain a basic truth about U.S. wars of choice: We don't have to be this way.

Admittedly, it's difficult to uproot entrenched systems, like the military-industrial-congressional-media-Washington, D.C., complex, which involves corporate profits and government jobs. Mainstream media seldom help us recognize ourselves as a menacing, warrior nation. Yet we must look in the mirror held up by historical circumstances if we're ever to accomplish credible change.

The recently released "Afghanistan Papers" criticize U.S. military and elected officials for misleading the U.S. public by covering up disgraceful military failures in Afghanistan. Pentagon officials were quick to dismiss the critiques, assuring an easily distracted U.S. public that the documents won't impact U.S. military and foreign policy. Two days later, UNICEF reported that more than 600 Afghan children had died in 2019, because of direct attacks in the war. From 2009 through 2018, almost 6,500 children lost their lives in this war.

Addressing the U.S. Senate and Congress during a visit to Washington, D.C., Pope Francis voiced a simple, conscientious question. "Why are deadly weapons being sold to those who plan to inflict untold suffering on individuals and society?" Answering his own question, he said: "the answer, as we all know, is simply for money: money that is drenched in blood, often innocent blood."

What are the lessons learned from the rampage, destruction and cruelty of U.S. wars? I believe the most important lessons are summed up in the quote on Cynthia Banas's T-shirt as she delivered water to Marines in Baghdad, in April, 2003: "War Is Not the Answer"; and in an updated version of the headline Ramzi Kysia wrote that same month: "Heavy-handed & Hopeless, The U.S. Military Doesn't Know What It's Doing" -in Iraq, Afghanistan or any of its "forever wars."

[Kathy Kelly co-coordinates Voices for Creative Nonviolence. While in Kabul, she is a guest of the Afghan Peace Volunteers.]