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Afghanistan: Speaking Truth to Power

by Kathy Kelly



Young students in school in Kabul

Commentary

There's a phrase originating with the peace activism of the American Quaker movement: "Speak Truth to Power." One can hardly speak more directly to power than addressing the Presidential Administration of the United States. This past October, students at Islamabad's Islamic International University had a message for Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. One student summed up many of her colleagues' frustration. "We don't need America," she said. "Things were better before they came here."

The students were mourning loss of life at their University where, a week earlier, two suicide bombers walked onto the campus wearing explosive devices and left seven students dead and dozens of others seriously injured. Since the spring of 2009, under pressure from U.S. leaders to "do more" to dislodge militant Taliban groups, the Pakistani government has been waging military offensives throughout the northwest of the country. These bombing attacks have displaced millions and the Pakistani government has apparently given open permission for similar attacks by unmanned U.S. aerial drones.

Every week, Pakistani militant groups have launched a new retaliatory atrocity in Pakistan, killing hundreds more civilians in markets, schools, government buildings, mosques and sports facilities. Who can blame the student who believed that her family and friends were better off before the U.S. began

insisting that Pakistan cooperate with U.S. military goals in the region?

In neighboring Afghanistan, 2009 was the deadliest year for Afghan children since 2001, according to the Afghanistan Rights Monitor. In a January 6 statement, the group noted that in 2009 about 1050 children had died in suicide attacks, roadside blasts, air strikes and the cross-fire between Taliban insurgents and pro-government forces, both Afghan and foreign. The group's director, Ajmal Samadi, noted that this figure amounted to nearly three children per day.

It's estimated that nearly one third of these children's deaths were caused by US/NATO coalition forces. This week, hundreds of Afghans have taken to the streets in protest after the Afghan government said its investigation has established that all 10 people killed by U.S. led forces on January 3rd, in a remote village in Kunar province, were civilians and that eight of those killed were schoolchildren, aged 12-14.

The *London Times* reports that the U.S.-led troops were accused of dragging the innocent children from their beds, handcuffing several of them, and then killing all eight of them.

Stories of carnage, horror and impoverishment aren't new in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Pakistan. Ten years ago, each of these countries suffered under severely repressive governance and extremes of poverty. In the case of Iraq, these conditions were made immeasurably worse by U.S.-imposed economic sanctions that punished innocent Iraqi citizens for their inability to rise from under Saddam Hussein's brutal regime, all the while rendering them completely dependent on Hussein's regime to meet their basic survival needs.

Yet in all this suffering that preceded the U.S. invasions of the region, there were very few accounts of suicide bombings in the lands where the U.S. is now at war. The kidnapping and torture industries, now rife in all three countries, had not developed, and their entire economies had not been hobbled by blatant official corruption.

What has U.S. invasion and occupation unleashed in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan? And how are these wars creating security for U.S. people?

The *New York Times* reported on November 14, 2009 that, according to internal U.S. government estimates, it costs one million dollars to keep one soldier in Afghanistan for one year.

Consider this sum in light of the fact that, in Afghanistan, district governors earn 70 dollars per month. Their operation budget is 15 dollars per month, and half of them have no dedicated office. Or, in light of the UN estimate that the Gross Domestic Product, per capita, in Afghanistan, is less than \$1,000 per year. Or that The United Nation's Children's Fund, better known as UNICEF, says Afghanistan is the worst place in the world to be born, having the highest infant mortality rate in the world with 257 deaths per 1,000 live births. Only 70 percent of Afghans have access to clean water.

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Kai Eide, the outgoing Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Afghanistan, briefed the UN Security Council on January 5, 2010. With regard to military activities, he bluntly stated that "civilian casualties, house searches, and detention policies are sources of recruitment for the insurgency."

President Obama's administration is soon expected to request another "emergency" supplemental

expenditure for the Iraq and Afghan wars, this time for between 40 and 50 billion dollars. If (some would say, when) this figure is approved, it will make 2010 fiscally the most costly year of the ongoing War on Terror, surpassing President Bush's expenditures by a significant margin.

Before the year is out, President Obama will also have submitted a budget item to fund the wars in 2011, with military services already planning to request something in the range of \$160 to \$165 billion.

The U.S. Constitution states that Congress shall make no law to abridge the right of people to assemble peaceably for redress of grievance. We are deeply aggrieved by the folly of these wars. Our right to free speech is irrelevant if we don't exercise it, and so we intend to raise the lament of those who bear the brunt of our wars but whose voices seldom reach U.S. government figures.

For two weeks this January, leading up to the date when President Obama is due to submit his budget for Fiscal Year 2011 to Congress, Voices for Creative Nonviolence and friends will gather in Washington D.C. for a "Peaceable Assembly Campaign" project. We'll be meeting with elected representatives to raise questions about the folly and the crime of war, holding daily vigils at the White House, and engaging in acts of nonviolent civil disobedience to emphasize our refusal to cooperate with the war makers.

We urge you to join us in this year-long campaign, whether in Washington D.C. this month, or participating locally where you live. Please make sure to visit the Voices website, www.vcnv.org, to learn more about ways to become involved, both locally through this coming summer and in the Days of Resistance in Washington. We'll be there from January 19th through February 2nd.

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