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Afghanistan's massacred innocents have names

Art Laffin | May. 9, 2012

U.S. Army soldiers from Delta Company, a part of Task Force 1-66, patrol in the village of Gul Kalacheh in the Kandahar province of Afghanistan in 2010. (CNS/Reuters/Oleg Popov)

COMMENTARY

With opinion polls showing high disapproval of the U.S. war in Afghanistan and in the wake of the upcoming NATO summit in Chicago, President Barack Obama's trip last week to Afghanistan was intended to demonstrate to the American people and its allies that the war in Afghanistan will soon end. Instead, Obama's visit, in the dark of night, signaled a continuation of U.S. military involvement into the future and more tragedy for the Afghan people.

The nightmare of unspeakable suffering for the Afghan people caused by the war only seems to worsen with each passing day. On Friday, a mother and her five children were killed by U.S./NATO strikes in the Helmand province. And on Monday, it was reported that eight more civilians died from another U.S./NATO airstrike in the Badghis province.

This Friday marks two months since the massacre in Kandahar province of 17 civilians, including nine children.

It was reported that three women and nine children were killed in their sleep, and some of the victims' bodies were burned beyond recognition.

According to the Pentagon, a single American soldier, Staff Sgt. Robert Bales, was responsible for these deaths. However, a probe [1] by several Afghan lawmakers concluded that other U.S. soldiers were also involved.

This is not the first massacre of Afghan civilians by U.S. military and NATO forces. There have been several others, mostly of children, in the last year.

When accounts of these massacres are reported in the public media, the names of the victims are rarely, if ever, noted. The U.S. military has gone to great lengths to prevent the American people from seeing photos of the victims, hearing their names or reading accounts of their lives. So long as this is the case, it makes it easier for the public to acquiesce to such massacres.

If we don't know the names and can't see the faces of the dead, how can we really care about them or their grieving families? They are, in fact, practically invisible. But these victims are real people with identities and histories.

Thanks to friends from Voices for Creative Nonviolence who have gone to Afghanistan and have developed friendships with Afghan Youth for Peace Volunteers, the names of victims in two massacres have been released.

Additional names appeared in a story in *The New York Times*, along with the voice of a father, Abdul Zahid, whose children were killed in a U.S./NATO airstrike a month earlier. In that story [2], Zahid describes the area in which he lives and how he experienced the airstrike:

> "We don't have paved roads, school or a clinic in Gayawa. There's almost one meter of snow here in our village and we send our children to take care of the goats and sheep and feed them and collect firewood from the trees nearby and bring it home so we can heat our homes."
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> On Feb. 8 when the bombing happened, the children had gone as usual to the grazing area outside the village. They had just finished letting the animals graze and had made a small fire to keep warm when they were bombed, he said.
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> "Suddenly some airplanes came and dropped bombs on the children and killed my son, my two nephews and some other children from our village," said Mr. Zahid. "When we went there we saw the children in pieces, some missing legs, some missing arms, only the heads and face could be recognized, nothing else."

According to a former Afghan Parliamentarian, Malalai Joya, these "images will come as a shock to many outside Afghanistan, but not to us. We have seen countless incidents of American and NATO forces killing innocent people like birds."

While U.S. military and political officials have offered apologies for several of these shameful acts of violence, these apologies ring hollow to the victims' families as long as the killing and ruthless occupation continues.

And while amounts of up to $50,000 in compensation have been offered to these families, no amount of money can ever compensate for the death of a loved one. Meanwhile, the toll of civilian deaths continues to rise, as it has for the fifth straight year -- from almost 2,800 in 2010 to more than 3,000 in 2011.

In response to the March 11 massacre, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta is reported to have said [3] in an interview: "War is hell. These kind of events and incidences are going to take place. They've taken place in any war. They're terrible events. This is not the first of those events, and they probably won't be the last."

I agree with Panetta that "war is hell." But if he really believes that is true, that the loss of life is so terrible and that similar atrocities will probably occur in the future, why wouldn't he or other officials who share the same belief urge the U.S. to immediately put an end to these things?

Is it because of a moral blindness that causes us to betray God's law to the point where war has become an addiction? Is it to protect and ensure vital U.S. geopolitical and economic interests in the region, like natural gas and almost $1 trillion in untapped mineral resources that include iron, copper, cobalt, gold and critical industrial metals such as lithium?

God commands us to love and not to kill. It is the responsibility of all followers of Jesus to nonviolently resist any act of systemic and personal violence, and to stand in solidarity with and care for the victims.

If the U.S. war against Afghanistan is really to end, we have to see the Afghan people as our brothers and sisters -- as if they were literally members of our own families -- and know their names. The United States must then beg forgiveness from the Afghan people, repent for the sin of war-making, immediately end its immoral and illegal occupation, and make reparations to the people of Afghanistan.

Washington-area peacemakers read the names of the March 11 victims at a Lenten prayer service March 30 in front of the White House and publicly repented for this unspeakable war crime. On Good Friday, 10 peacemakers and I were arrested at the Pentagon as we prayed in silence around a cross and held signs that said "Put Away the Sword" and "We Remember the Afghan Victims Massacred on March 11th: Mohamed Dawood, Khudaydad, Payendo, Nazar Mohamed, Robeena, Shatarina, Zahra, Nazia, Masooma, Farida, Palwasha, Nabia, Esmatullah, Essa Mohamed, Faizullah, and Akhtar Mohamed."

At our trial May 18, I intend to solemnly remember these precious lives.

War is hell. It is hell for our grieving Afghan sisters and brothers who live under occupation and face constant misery and death. And it is hell for U.S. soldiers and their families, especially those who have died, committed suicide or who have been physically wounded and mentally scarred for life.

When President Obama was in Afghanistan on May 1, he met with Afghan President Hamid Karzai and signed "The Strategic Partnership Agreement," pledging a withdrawal of U.S. troops by the end of 2014 and providing U.S. military training, support and other aid through 2024.

The time is now, not in 2014 and beyond, to end the slaughter in Afghanistan.

[Art Laffin is a member of the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker community in Washington, D.C.]

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