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'Who will hear our voice?': the plea of Afghan women

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

This week, as our war president was inaugurated on the holiday of Martin Luther King Jr., I thought how King would be speaking out boldly against our war in Afghanistan, our use of drones, our use of torture, our use of execution and our use of bombs and call us once again to end the killings, become people of nonviolence and side with the victims of our war that we might create the "beloved community."

So my thoughts turn again to the many impoverished women and children I met last month in Kabul. Reflecting on my journey to Afghanistan, I hear the question that was asked over and over again: "Who will hear our voice?"

"No one listens to our voices," one woman told us. "We can't imagine a better future for our children. There is little hope for them. Some countries say they send aid, but where is it? We have never seen it. It all goes into the hands of the government leaders who buy homes in Dubai. Who will hear the voice of the people? We have so much pain in our hearts because no one will listen to us."

"How much longer will we have war?" another woman asked. "Afghans know that the U.S. government is here for its own interest, not the interests of the people. Who will listen to the voice of the people?"

"Why is there always war?" still another woman asked. "Who will listen to the poor? No one listens to us poor people."

"Who will hear the voice of the people? Who will listen to the poor? Who will hear our voice?"

One person who is listening to the voice of Afghan women and children is Malalai Joya. In 2007, Joya was elected to the Afghan parliament and immediately condemned the warlords and war criminals. She began to receive death threats and was quickly removed. She has survived several assassination attempts,

but continues today to work for Afghan women and an end to the U.S. war and occupation. Recently, *Time* magazine named Malalai Joya one of the most 100 influential people in the world.

We hoped to meet Joya during our visit with various Afghan parliamentarians, but she was out of the country. The other day, I came across an extensive interview with her conducted by Elsa Rassbach. I invite us to hear her voice -- and the voice of Afghan women and children -- as a counter-voice to the men of war, and let her words and the plea of the Afghan women inspire us to keep doing what we can for peace.

Here are some excerpts from Malalai Joya:

Afghanistan is the worst place to be a woman, according to a recent international study.

The situation of women in Afghanistan was used as an excuse for the U.S. and NATO to occupy our country. But it is clear they were not fighting on behalf of women, because they have put into power the reactionary warlords who are sworn enemies of women.

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There is no question that some schools and universities have been built during the U.S./NATO occupation, and some money has been given to the Karzai regime for projects on behalf of women's and human rights. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of civilians, most of them women and children, have been killed during these eleven years of occupation. They even used white phosphorous; they even bombed wedding parties.

In comparison to the dark period of the medieval-minded Taliban, today there is now a Ministry of Women, and 25% of the representatives in the parliament are women. But the female representatives have mainly a symbolic function, and little is done for ordinary women. In the larger cities like Kabul and Herat, women have some jobs and education, but in most of Afghanistan, their lives are hell. The media don't write much about the many women who are raped or stoned to death in public. Hundreds of schools have been closed, and even in Kabul women don't have security going to school; in many provinces acid is thrown in their faces. In most places killing a woman is still as easy as killing a bird.

Due to lack of justice and pressure on women, last year 2,300 suicide cases were recorded among Afghan women, which has no parallel in our history.

These warlords are misogynists, just like the Taliban, and they don't want women's rights in Afghanistan; a few token fundamentalist ladies wearing beautiful clothes should not fool people. And many of the women who have positions, who run NGOs, are corrupt and have received money from the occupation; they betray the truth and justify the U.S. occupation and are even ready to negotiate with the Taliban. Through this, the situation of women will become more bloody and more of a disaster.

Under the U.S./NATO occupation, there is day by day a widening gap between rich and poor. A small percentage of drug-lords, warlords and corrupt officials have everything in their hands while a large majority of the people suffers from poverty and unemployment. Under the occupation, Afghanistan has become the biggest producer of opium and heroin in the world. With the efforts of the U.S. and NATO, Afghanistan has become the capital of the world drug Mafia and also now tops the list of the world's most corrupt countries (according to a recent study by Transparency International). All of the "achievements," if any, that can be attributed to the U.S./NATO occupation are spoiled by these shameful epidemics that have had and will continue to have a long-run disastrous effect on the whole society.

As history shows, the U.S. has relied on criminals, dictators, human rights violators, and reactionary forces in many other countries of the world. Recently in Libya, the U.S. and NATO supported fundamentalists who are worse than Qaddafi; in Syria, they are supporting Al-Qaeda and other such dirty groups. So it is not surprising that they are once again working with the Taliban and with Hekmatyar and other criminals in my country.

It was the U.S. that brought the warlords into power in Kabul, and the U.S./NATO puppet Karzai is even more shameless than previous Afghan puppets of the British and the Russians. While the puppets of Russia and Britain negotiated behind closed doors, Karzai is publicly selling Afghanistan to a foreign master. The so-called strategic agreements like the Bilateral Security Agreement provide for long-term U.S./NATO military bases in Afghanistan. The U.S. wants to remain in Afghanistan because of its geopolitical location: to be able to control other Asian powers like Pakistan, Iran, Russia and China.

Karzai and Obama are working on an outline of an agreement for legalizing permanent military bases in Afghanistan. But as long as we have foreign military bases in our country, we have no independence. And when we have no independence, we have nothing, and all talk of democracy, human rights and women's rights is a joke ...

For the U.S. government, the well being of the Afghan people has no value at all. The U.S. elites just want relative stability in order to continue the occupation and maintain military bases in Afghanistan without much trouble. If "stability" can be achieved by empowering the worst enemies of Afghan people, they are ready to do this.

We are fed up with the so-called helping hand of the U.S. and NATO that is used to justify occupation. The mother and father of all these tragedies is the occupation itself and the U.S./NATO support of the killers of my people. When the occupation leaves, these fundamentalists will get weak. They have no roots in the heart of the people, and their backbone will break. If the U.S. stops helping terrorists and killers, then they may not be in a position to wage a civil war and destroy Afghanistan like they did in 90's.

So the first request of the people is: Leave Afghanistan and stop supporting our enemies?

When women learn to read and write, many of them become extraordinary activists, and these brave women are running projects and organizations that are really working on behalf of women's and human rights, like RAWA, like OPAWC, like the Social Association of Afghan Justice Seekers, and a few others that I know who are also justice-seekers. And now women are even coming onto the streets and demonstrating, wearing the burka, in resistance against the U.S. and NATO and also against the Islamic fundamentalists. This is a positive example and a source of hope. In the history of Afghanistan, we have never before seen this kind of activism by women.

In different parts of Afghanistan there are small protests -- in Kabul, in Jalalabad, in Helmand Province and in Farah Province, and in many other places -- and for the first time women are joining these protests. I hope that with time, there will be a broader movement in Afghanistan like in many of the Arab countries. It will take time.

[My message to US and NATO Officials is:] Stop this criminal war in my country as soon as possible. Your war, waged under a fake banner of human rights and democracy, is in fact a war against poor Afghan people. You are not only traitors to the Afghan people, but to your own people as well. You are stealing from the pockets of poor Americans and Europeans and wasting billions of dollars on killing and looting in order to safeguard only the interests of a very small, elite minority. You have a massive war and propaganda machine to sell your lies. But the world's conscience, which includes a large number of U.S. antiwar veterans, is against you: you can't overturn it by any means. So your war machinery is doomed to fail, and the toiling people of the world will win.

John Dear will lead a retreat on nonviolence with Roshi Joan Halifax on Feb. 15-17 at the Upaya Zen Monastery in Santa Fe, N.M., and will speak for the abolition of nuclear weapons with Martin Sheen and Archbishop Desmond Tutu at an international anti-nuclear conference March 2-5 in Oslo, Norway. He will lead a retreat, "Jesus the Peacemaker," April 5-7 in Pennsylvania. To see John's speaking schedule for 2013 or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website. One of John's essays appears in the new book *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For*. His book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. John's talk at the 2011 Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire*. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*, *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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