



FROM HASTINGS TO KABUL

*My Christmas with Refugees, Justice Seekers
and Peace Volunteers*

**VOICES FOR
CREATIVE
NON-VIOLENCE UK**



Maya Evans was the first British peace activist to visit Afghanistan since the 2001 US/NATO invasion. While in Kabul in December 2011, she worked with the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers and Voices for Creative Non Violence US; she also met with Afghan peace activists,

NGOs, civil servants, journalists, and visited a refugee camp.

Maya currently has two ongoing judicial reviews against the British Government for 'alleged' complicity in the torture of Afghan detainees and the 'alleged' involvement of British troops in the shooting of Afghan civilians.

The relationship Maya built with the Afghan Peace Volunteers continues with events in the UK in solidarity with the group's activities. In December 2012 Maya plans to lead the first British peace delegation to visit Afghanistan since the 2001 invasion.

This pamphlet was written by **Maya Evans** and **Gabriel Carlyle**.

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Arriving

The Sun was setting as my plane approached Kabul and readied itself to land. My first sight of Afghanistan was the snow-capped hills and gigantic mountain ranges which seemed to stretch forever. From the plane I could see meandering roads snaking around endless mountain passes. It had just turned to dusk as I left the plane and stepped onto the runway.

It was strange to be finally in the country that I had spent so many years campaigning about. Vigils in Whitehall, arrests, bailiffs knocking on the door, a High Court case against the British Government for its complicity in the torture of Afghan prisoners... not to mention standing in the rain giving out leaflets.

Here I finally was, in a country which Britain had been at war with for more than ten years – longer than both the First and Second World Wars put together.

Judging by the number of helicopters and fighter jets stationed there, the airport seemed to double as a military bay. As I made my way to Immigration I was greeted by a large sign: “Welcome to Afghanistan, land of the brave”.

I immediately headed for a queue with some other women in it. My pious Islamic outfit – purchased from Whitechapel Market only a week before – was probably too authentic, as all the other (likely middle class) Afghan women wore western jeans and tops with scarves loosely tied round their heads.

Having grown up in East London, on a road with a mosque at the top, and attended a school where 60% of the pupils were Muslim, I’ve never considered Islam as foreign or threatening, or synonymous with terrorism and violence. My first awareness of terrorism had been in the 1980’s with the IRA, and then later with fascists attacking Asians in Brick Lane. Many of my childhood friends, my local shop keeper, doctors, bus drivers were all Muslims.

When I reached the front of the queue I approached a man at a counter inside a small wooden booth. It reminded me of the candy stall at Hastings fairground. Despite the dated décor, immigration control includes having your retina and finger prints scanned – presumably a US innovation.

My mind was set on finding Parking Lot C where I was due to meet my friend, the US peace activist Kathy Kelly, and our hosts, the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers (AYPV).

I walked towards the exit and onto a second bus which took us to what I hoped was Parking Lot C. By the time I got off it was properly dark. There was no street lighting and the air was thick and misty with pollution. I looked around for my friends but they were nowhere to be seen, so I wandered through the gathered crowd trying not to look lost or worried.

I went into the waiting lounge and looked around. Hmmm, no sign of any familiar faces. I felt concerned at the idea of being in a foreign country with no friends and unable to speak the language. I made a beeline for a group of women sat on some seats. They looked up at me in amazement and smiled, my parka coat with fake-fur-fringed-hood and my massive back-packer’s rucksack made me stand out like a sore thumb. I slumped down on the seat, pleased to get the weight off my back, and smiled, “Salaam!” They were nodding and smiling as if to humour me.

My phone had worked in Bahrain so I had a hunch it would work in Kabul. I switched it on and phoned Gabriel (part of my support team). Amazingly it rang and even more amazingly he picked up “Hello Gabriel it’s me, I’m in Kabul and I think I’m lost.” No sooner had I finished my sentence than I spotted a Singaporean man with a teenage boy in tow racing through the waiting lounge... “Hang on. I think I may have spotted them...” Then, out of nowhere, Kathy Kelly appeared followed by four incredibly smiley young Afghan faces. My friends had arrived.

There were enthusiastic “Salaams” all round as I met the Volunteers. Their ethnic groups include Tajik, Hazara and Pashtun, a very unique gathering due to the deep ethnic divisions in Afghanistan. I quickly discovered that this was just one of the many unique things about the AYPV.

The drive out of the airport to the apartment was wild. We immediately passed an open-backed police van with a mounted gun on the roof (a standard police vehicle) and a group of police officers standing in the back chatting. It seemed like a dream as we hurtled down the road, cars flying in various directions: beaten up houses, beggars in the middle of the road, piles of rubbish everywhere.

When we arrived at the apartment we had a proper introduction followed by Q&A. The AYPV asked me various questions about my views on peace, including how many people in Britain campaign against the war. That was a tough question, partly because it’s hard to know how many active anti-war campaigners there are in the UK, and partly because if I could give an accurate figure it wasn’t going to be very high. I really didn’t want to disappoint them.



The Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers

The Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers (AYPV) are a group of about a dozen young people, mainly from the rural province of Bamiyan.

They first came together in 2008 after their co-ordinator, Hakim – a medical doctor from Singapore, who has lived and worked alongside Afghans for the last eight years – ran a program at Bamiyan University to investigate the potential for creating peace in Afghanistan. The older students concluded that it was impossible, but some of the younger ones were inspired to form the AYPV.

Now based in Kabul, the AYPV have organized a string of projects, including the creation of a peace park and public protests against the warlords that dominate the Government. They are now trying to get 2 million people to sign a letter urging the UN to call for a ceasefire – one for each of the 2 million Afghans who have died in 30 years of war (www.2millionfriends.org). Such campaigning activities are considered radical in Afghanistan.

When I first asked them about their peace work I was impressed by the way in which they responded with intelligence and thoughtfulness, drawing on their own diverse personal experiences.

One Volunteer had his father killed by the Taliban, while a second had almost been recruited to fight when he was 12. A third had lost his brother-in-law to a drone bombing, and a fourth had witnessed his brothers’ murder as a young boy.

I asked them what they thought of foreign intervention in Afghanistan. Momajan, a young good-looking Tajik man, replied: “If you want a continuation of violence then you support NATO, if you want peace then military foreign powers must leave.”

Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers: www.youthpeacevolunteers.org

Torture and detention

Most people have heard of the US prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Fewer are aware that the US has also been running similar – in many respects worse – prisons of its own in Afghanistan, such as the one at Bagram, 60km north of the capital.

A major investigation for the US newspaper group McClatchy, found that Bagram “was a center of systematic brutality for at least 20 months” following the 2001 invasion. Allegations of torture and abuse of detainees in US custody include “sleep deprivation; stripping and forced nudity ... kicking, punching and other physical assault ... electric shocks, immersion in water, cigarette burns; and soldiers urinating on detainees” (*Amnesty International*).

Under Obama, the number of detainees at Bagram – none of whom have received a fair trial – has mushroomed from 600 to 3000, and current plans are to extend it still further.

On paper, the prison system is now under Afghan control. However, with the US retaining a veto on releases – and apparently retaining control over each new detainee for a period of six months – it is, in the words of the Afghanistan Analysts Network’s Kate Clark, a system with an ‘Afghan face’ but ‘still largely controlled by the US military’.

Nonetheless, in keeping with the traditional US pattern, from Vietnam to Central America, today most of the torture of alleged “insurgents” is done by proxies such as the Afghan secret police (NDS).

According to the UN, the NDS “is among the most enduring of the [Afghan] state’s institutions, with many of its institutional

“The widespread abuse of prisoners is a virtually foolproof indication that politicians are trying to impose a system – whether political, religious or economic – that is rejected by large numbers of the people they are ruling”
Naomi Klein

structures, personnel, facilities and legal regulations dating back to the communist period”, during which torture was widespread and systematic. The NDS also receives almost the whole of its budget from foreign donors, as well as “technical assistance and training” from the UK.

In November 2007 Amnesty International produced a report highlighting the complicity of NATO forces in the torture of detainees handed over to Afghan forces¹.

The report was disturbing, but it wasn’t until I met Phil Shiner of Public Interest Lawyers at an event organised by Liberty, that the idea of pursuing a High Court judicial review of Britain’s transfer policies became a real possibility.

After various hurdles, and a long wait for a reluctant MoD to release various sensitive documents, the review finally took place in April 2010.

In the meantime, in November 2009 the former second-in-command at Canada’s embassy in Kabul, Richard Colvin, told a Canadian parliamentary committee: “[T]he likelihood is that all the Afghans we handed over [to the Afghan authorities] were tortured ... we detained and handed over for severe torture a lot of innocent people.”

In what the judges described as a “partial victory” for us, the High Court ruled that further transfers of detainees to the NDS facility in Kabul - situated not far from the US embassy – would be unlawful.

The decision to pursue the case was further vindicated by the publication, in 2011, of a UN report that found compelling evidence of systematic torture in five NDS facilities – including at least one deemed lawful for detainee transfers by the High Court.

Nonetheless, the ruling changed nothing for detainees picked up by Afghan forces. And, as Kate Clark has noted, the UK continues to support an intelligence agency that “still unashamedly practices torture against those not protected by the foreigners’ scrutiny.”

¹ ‘Afghanistan: Detainees transferred to torture: ISAF complicity?’, tinyurl.com/isafcomplicity



My first morning in Kabul, I went with Momajan and Roz Mohammed to change up my money with a street vendor.

From my observations, it's not the norm for foreigners to walk on the streets in Kabul. Apparently, the city is crawling with Westerners but they all live in secured compounds and hang out in exclusive shopping malls and restaurants.

Stepping out into the bright cold streets of Kabul, I was blinded by the brightness of the sun and then choked by the pollution. My immediate thought was that I had stepped into Dickensian London, only far worse: piles of rubbish on the street; open sewers running alongside the dirt pavements; bric-a-brac junk shops housed in dilapidated shacks; beggars every few yards. The number of people with disabilities is extreme.

The air pollution was like nothing that I had ever experienced during my 18 years growing up in East London. Pavements are improvised or sometimes non-existent. There are no traffic regulations, no zebra crossings or traffic lights. To cross a road you take your life into your hands among the zigzagging cars, motorbikes and bicycles.

→ **As of Feb 2012 the US had spent roughly \$500bn on the war in Afghanistan, and roughly \$20bn on "aid".** Britain had spent over £18bn on the war and £1.6bn on "aid". A 2008 report by aid agencies working in the country estimated that 40% of all aid delivered was spent on corporate profits and consultancy fees. Afghanistan remains one of the poorest countries in the world, ranked 172 out of 187 in the UN's 2011 Human Development Index.

Sources:
costofwar.com;
Committee on Foreign Relations, US Senate;
Royal United Services Institute; UN

→ **29.5% of children in southern Afghanistan are acutely malnourished,** a level similar to that found in famine zones. The worst affected areas – around Kandahar and Helmand – are the ones that have seen some of the heaviest fighting over the past 10 years.

The number of people on the street with guns was very disconcerting. Guards stationed outside buildings, shops, and banks: all with a gun slung over their shoulder.

Every so often you can spot relics of the former Kabul, such as a redundant red fire hydrant near the river. If there was a fire today there would be no fire service or means of mobilising the fire hydrant, even if it still worked.

I couldn't help wondering where America's 2011 daily war budget of £20 million went? Walking the streets of Kabul it's clear to see that it hasn't gone on basic infrastructure.

It was something of a relief when we got back to the calm of the apartment. It felt like the most intense short walk of my life.

Nonetheless, it wasn't long before I was getting my stuff together for my first road trip.

Our driver Iman Dod, a short Hazarra man with a wild glint in his eye, turned up with a people carrier which we all piled into. As soon as the door slammed shut we hurtled off down the road; past a cemetery the size of a football pitch and crammed with graves, headstones made out of bits of slate; then a shepherd with a small flock of hardy goats grazing (on rubbish) by the roadside, and a small boy sitting on a bollard in the middle of the road, cheerfully eating a flat bread.

At one point we took a wrong turn so our driver simply turned the vehicle round and we continued our journey down a small motorway in the opposite direction to the oncoming traffic...



In December 2010, during the obligatory Prime Ministerial Christmas visit to the troops in Afghanistan, David Cameron boasted about the number of strikes by British drones – i.e. remote-control aircraft – in Afghanistan, announcing the doubling of Britain’s drone fleet. However, despite the best efforts of campaigners, little is known about those on the receiving-end of such strikes.

How many of those killed were directly engaged in hostilities at the time, or civilians? The Government isn’t saying, and Freedom of Information requests have been rebuffed on the grounds that revealing such information is “likely to prejudice the defence of the British Island”.

Ironically, more appears to be known about the CIA’s covert drone war in neighbouring Pakistan, where – according to research conducted by the Bureau for Investigative Journalism – over 280 civilians, including at least 60 children, have been credibly reported killed in such attacks since Obama took office.

→ In May 2012 the UK MoD reported that British Reapers had undertaken 281 armed attacks in Afghanistan since 2008.

→ Since mid-2012 the UK has had 44 crews operating its armed drones, keeping three drones in the air 24/7

→ By 2015, the MoD will have spent over £500m on its drone war in Afghanistan

During my 3-week visit to Kabul I met one of the many Afghans whose life has been impacted by drone warfare, nineteen-year-old Roz Mohammad – an articulate student, studying at the University of Kabul – had lost his brother-in-law, a trainee police officer, in just such an attack. In all, five people – none of them “insurgents” – were killed, leaving Roz Mohammad’s sister widowed with a one-year-old son.

At NATO’s request, the burial of the charred bodies (which, for religious reasons, would normally have taken place within 24 hours) was postponed. However no explanation was forthcoming, and – as far as Roz Mohammad is aware – no-one has ever been held accountable.

Until recently, all of the UK’s armed “Reaper” drones were piloted by an RAF squadron based at Creech air base in Nevada, outside Las Vegas. However, in October 2012 a second squadron started piloting an five new Reaper drones from RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire. Hopefully Waddington will now become a major focus for anti-drones campaigning.



Bombing

Although the number of airstrikes appears to have dipped in recent years, aerial bombing remains central to the war (“Without air, we’d need hundreds of thousands of troops”, a senior NATO official once explained). However, the voices of the victims are rarely heard in the West.

While in Kabul, I had the good fortune to meet up with the London-based photojournalist Guy Smallman – the only western journalist to have visited the scene of the Granai massacre, a May 2009 airstrike in Afghanistan’s western Farah province, in which scores of civilians were killed, most of them children.

Dressed in a combination of traditional Afghan clothing, dark glasses and a woolly hat, Guy cuts a striking – if intense – figure. Despite the risk of capture – he was told that it would take the Taliban only 25 minutes to arrive if someone decided to alert them to his presence – Guy made his way to the village and was shown the cemetery with its 70 fresh graves, and a massive grave, 40–50m across, containing the remains of some 50-odd people who had literally been blown to pieces.

According to Guy, when he reached the site of the main bombing, the stench of decomposing bodies was all-pervasive.

In what appears to be the standard pattern on such occasions, the Pentagon initially claimed that most of those killed had been insurgents, before backtracking in the face of mounting evidence.

It was all lies.

Of course, most air attacks never receive such scrutiny. Indeed, in a 2008 poll one-in-six Afghans reported coalition bombardment in

“Why do NATO lie to us? They say they can differentiate between the Taliban and civilians but they destroyed my family, my home, my life... I have nothing left.”

Agah Lalai, whose wife, father, 3 brothers, 4 sisters, grandmother and grandfather were all killed by a NATO airstrike in Helmand on the night of 8/9 May 2007

→ **Fieldwork conducted by the pro-war Senlis Council (an international policy think-tank) suggested that in 2006 – the year of Britain’s major escalation in the country – as many as 2–3000 civilians may have been killed by aerial bombing in Southern Afghanistan¹. The UN only ever reported a tiny number of these deaths.**

their area within the past year, rising to almost half in the southwest and nearly 40% in the east².

The UN logged 187 civilian deaths from aerial bombing in 2011, a 9% rise on the previous year – though it seems likely that this represents only a fraction of the real total.

A few weeks before I arrived in the country, six children – whose ages ranged from 4 to 12 – were killed in a NATO airstrike in Kandahar province. Abdul Samad, an uncle of four of the children, later told the New York Times that his relatives had been working in fields near their village when they were attacked without warning.

These killings had a particular resonance for the members of the AYPV, many of whom were from farming families, and were used to rising in the early hours of the morning to collect wood in a horse-drawn cart, before spending the day doing heavy manual labour on their parents’ farms. The thought must have occurred to them that it could have been them – or their friends and family – on the receiving end of NATO’s firepower.

1 ‘Hearts and Minds’, Senlis Council, December 2006, tinyurl.com/senliscouncil

2 ‘Support for US Efforts Plummets Amid Afghanistan’s Ongoing Strife’, ABC News, 9 February 2009



When US special forces and their Afghan allies kicked down Syed Mohammad’s door in the early hours of 1 September 2008, the 67-year-old, who lives in the eastern Kabul neighbourhood of Hotkheil, asked “Who are you?”.

“Shut up,” came the reply. “We are the government.”

Returning home at sunrise, following a brief period of detention, Mr Mohammad found that most of his family had been killed by the soldiers: his son, Nurallah; his son’s pregnant wife; and his grandsons Abdul Basit (one year old) and Mohammed (two years old).

But this was far from an isolated tragedy. Indeed, the US has long been operating what are, in effect, death squads in Afghanistan.

According to official NATO sources, at least 2,599 people – including an unknown number of civilians – were killed in 6,282 house raids during three 90-day periods spanning May 2010 – February 2011.

Moreover, British special forces are heavily involved in such killings.

In September 2010, “senior military sources” told the Telegraph that the Taliban in Helmand were being killed by the SAS on an “industrial scale... striking everything, even as far down as mid- to low-level commanders... They are not waiting for gold-plated intelligence to launch strikes, they are just really going for it.”

“[T]he major result of this strategy,” notes Thomas Ruttig, co-director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network, “is radicalisation”, as killed or captured commanders are replaced by younger, much more radical ones, further undermining the possibilities for a negotiated peace.”



Warlords

In 2011 The Times’ Afghanistan reporter, Jerome Starkey – who at that stage had lived in Afghanistan for almost five years – wrote that, “because no-one wants a son or daughter to have died for nothing, it is almost impossible to have an honest conversation about what those deaths might have achieved ... There is corrupt and predatory government in power. Women are still jailed for being raped, and outside the major cities their lives have barely changed since when the Taliban were in power. Warlords rule local fiefdoms like medieval kings and the rule of law is a commodity that only the rich enjoy.”¹

This dire situation is, in no small part, the result of US actions and decisions.

In the wake of the 2001 invasion, militias with horrific human rights records were “brought to power with the assistance of the United States”², and the political process manipulated by the US

in order to install a weak leader (Hamid Karzai) who was dependent upon foreign backing and the appeasement of these warlords.

In his 2008 book “Descent into Chaos” the Pakistani journalist (and Daily Telegraph reporter) Ahmed Rashid notes that, “The unstated US strategy was to leave Karzai ineffectual in the capital, protected by foreign forces, while relying on war lords to keep Pax Americana in the countryside... By following such a strategy, the United States left everything in place from the Taliban era except for the fact of regime change.”

In 2010 the Christian Science Monitor reported that many of the apparent winners in that year’s Parliamentary elections belonged to ‘a new generation of Afghan warlords that has risen since 2001 and attained wealth and power through NATO security contracts and lucrative reconstruction deals.’³

For example, millions of dollars’ worth of U.S. training and equipment have been given to the police commander in Kandahar, General Abdul Raziq – himself the son of a notorious warlord – despite his involvement in corruption, drug smuggling and major human rights abuses, including killings and torture.⁴

1 ‘It’s time to make peace. The sooner we leave the better’, 8 June 2011

2 ‘Afghanistan’, Human Rights Watch World Report 2005

3 ‘A changing of the guard for Afghanistan’s warlords’, 27 October 2010, tinyurl.com/changingtheguard

4 ‘Our man in Kandahar’, Atlantic Magazine, November 2011, tinyurl.com/ourmanink

→ “Elections” in Afghanistan have been marked by intimidation and massive fraud.

During the 2009 Presidential election Karzai selected Mohammad Qasim Fahim – “one of the most notorious warlords in the country with the blood of many Afghans on his hands from the civil war” (Human Rights Watch) – as one of his two vice-Presidential candidates.

Human Rights Watch identified Fahim as a key commander in the February 1993 Afshar massacre in which about 800 members of the Shia Hazara minority were killed in Kabul.

→ **A 2005 survey by the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, A Call for Justice, “concluded that a majority of Afghans consider themselves victims of human rights violations, and a significant proportion desire some form of ... justice such as a war crimes tribunal” ‘Bleeding Afghanistan’, Kolhatkar and Ingalls, Seven Stories Press, 2006**

Justice Seekers

One of the most remarkable groups I visited was the Social Association of Afghan Justice Seekers. After the usual hairy ride across town we arrived at the dilapidated building that houses their office. Climbing a dusty stairwell we crammed into a small room with two desks, and a traditional wood-burning stove in its centre.

The group’s two core female members, Weeda and Riha, had been students together at Kabul University. Inspired by a lecturer who had lived under the Soviet occupation, the subsequent civil war and the Taliban, they established the group to seek redress for the countless Afghans who have paid the price for speaking out.

Their work – often dangerous, as many of the perpetrators of past abuses have since been returned to power under the US occupation – involves gathering stories, documents and pictures from the victims’ families, as well as helping the families to organize themselves into support groups.

Every year they hold a public demonstration on 10 December (human rights day), though in the provinces – where it is too risky to openly go out on the streets – the families instead meet together in private spaces to remember their loved ones.

Weeda – a determined young woman in glasses and a loose head scarf – explained how the Association had wanted to work in an area in Tahar province where the local warlord openly boasted of having killed 20 people, but that the villagers were warned not to speak to members of the Association. It found its work similarly blocked

in Jalalabad, where local commanders threatened the villagers with beatings and death threats.

My request for examples of war criminals in the Government was greeted with hollow laughter. “All of them!”

“You could say that [maybe] 80% of the existing MPs are war criminals,” Weeda explained, if one includes not just “those who directly give orders for abuses and killings” but also “those who sit silently [and] are just as complicit because they are silent.”

“Now the subtle danger is that these war criminals who dominate parliament are bringing in new young faces. People don’t easily recognize women as war criminals, or a young fresh face, but they will sit quietly while old war criminals continue their crimes.”

The Association’s work concerns not only crimes from the past but also ongoing ones, committed by individuals who have US/NATO support, and Weeda and her colleagues have received repeated death threats as a consequence.

“What should we as peace activists in the US and Britain be doing?” I asked her. “We want the people of those countries... to speak up clearly about [their government’s] complicity in supporting the war criminals,” she replied.

Social Association of Afghan Justice Seekers:
www.saaajs.org

“Under the leadership of US/NATO there is political, financial [and] military support for these warlords. They support them because it benefits... US interests ... If a government were formed by the people of Afghanistan we wouldn’t find Afghans easily accepting permanent military bases, nor would they accept warlords in positions of power.”
Weeda Ahamd,
Association of Afghan Justice Seekers



“Some people say that when these troops withdraw a civil war will break out... The longer the foreign troops stay in Afghanistan doing what they are doing today, the worse the eventual civil war will be for the Afghan people”
Afghan women’s rights activist and former MP Malalai Joya

One day we visited a mixed Tajik and Pashtun community of 2,000 households on the outskirts of Kabul (“Wasabad”) which practices religious and ethnic tolerance and manages its own security.

I was interested to hear about how they would deal with the Taliban, especially as international forces use the threat posed by the Taliban as one of the main justifications for their remaining in Afghanistan. An elder with a long white beard and intense eyes told me: “The Taliban themselves have been nurtured by foreign elements, the Mujahideen had been armed by the US. The people of Afghanistan are trapped in a game which is hard to get out of. If there was no foreign interference then the Taliban could sit down with other Afghans and deal with their own problems, but with foreign interference there is always a condition which they will find impossible to accept. Afghans themselves can sit down together, however it is impossible with foreign interference.”

Taliban

During a meeting with an independent media organization we got talking about the Taliban, who they are and why they engage in acts of violence.

A young Hazara man who was part of the media organization had been kidnapped by the Taliban as a child. Had he not managed to escape, he could have been recruited as a fighter.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, he had a very negative attitude towards Pashtuns (the ethnic group to which perhaps as many as 95% of Taliban members belong) asserting that the: “education level of Pashtuns is low. Schools are built and then burned. Ideologies persuade people to accept suicide bombings. Their perspectives don’t extend far beyond war. If they could read broad-minded writings, they would be less prone to engage in terrorism”. He added: “If a Talib has a weapon he will think he should be using it to wage war”.

AYPV member Raz Mohammed is from the volatile, mainly Pashtun, province of Wardak in the central eastern region of Afghanistan. He is currently studying at the University of Kabul and was present during this meeting.

Probably one of the meekest people I have ever met, he responded, speaking with a slight stutter: “There are differences between the Taliban now and before. Previously they were motivated by religion, now people are rising to fight because of revenge – because they have been hurt.”

He told us the story of a young man from his village who had returned from University to find that both of his parents had been killed in a NATO airstrike. He wanted to know who had killed them and why, but was unable to get any answers or accountability. Eventually, his anger and sense of injustice led him to join the Taliban – a far from uncommon story (see page 23).

We also discussed the Taliban with AYPV member Abdulai, a 16 year old Hazara from the province of Bamian. A heartfelt soul with very good English and a smile to melt anyone’s heart, Abdulai is always keen to help. I had already learnt that his father had been

GLOSSARY

Mujahideen:

Name given to groups and individuals (Afghan and non-Afghan) who fought against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. The major Afghan Mujahideen groups fought a bloody civil war (1992 – 1996) in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal.

Taliban:

The Taliban first emerged in 1994 during the civil war (see above) as an armed fundamentalist Pashtun group led by Mullah Omar (himself a former Mujahideen). Receiving substantial support from Pakistan, the Taliban were able to take over 90% of Afghanistan.

Al-Qaida:

International “network of networks” of Islamist militants whose hallmarks include the use of political violence and a focus on attacking “the far enemy” (the US and the West). Arguably more of an idea than an actual organisation.

killed by the Taliban when he was five years old, and that his family had been forced to flee for their lives.

After agreeing to split-up and rendezvous away from the conflict-zone, his 15-year-old brother had carried Abdulai to safety on his back, crossing ravines and mountain passes with their mother and another sibling. His father, who had fled in a different direction was caught and killed.

Abdulai was asked what he thought about the Taliban. He was silent for a while and then, quietly, he said: “If a Talib was in this room now, I know there is only one way forward to resolve the situation... forgiveness”.

The room fell silent, I looked down and wept quietly. I wept for his pain and wept for his strength and wisdom. I was astounded that such a young person, who had experienced one of the worst things a child could endure, had chosen the hardest path to walk: forgiveness.

An unforgettable – and humbling – experience.

Taliban survey

“The typical Taliban foot soldier battling Canadian troops and their allies in Kandahar is not a global jihadist who dreams of some day waging war on Canadian soil,” but a young man who has had someone he “knows, or loves ... killed by a bomb dropped from the sky” and “fervently believes that expelling the foreigners will set things right in his troubled country,” concluded a 2007 survey commissioned by Canada’s Globe and Mail newspaper¹.

Using an Afghan researcher, the Mail made 42 video recordings with Taliban fighters in five of Kandahar’s districts between August and November 2007. Though not a “scientific survey”, it remains one of the few attempts to look at Taliban opinion in any systematic way, and its findings could well apply to the neighbouring province of Helmand, where most British forces have been deployed.

“Almost a third of respondents claimed that at least one family member had died in aerial bombings in recent years. Many also described themselves as fighting to defend Afghan villagers from air strikes by foreign troops.”

1 ‘Talking to the Taliban’, 22 March 2008, tinyurl.com/talking2taliban

The Displaced

As we approached a cluster of ramshackle mud huts on the side of a motorway, our driver warned us to be careful as two foreign journalists had been kidnapped in an Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp in Kabul only last year. I asked one of the AYPV if he was comfortable with accompanying me. He agreed and we both stepped out of the car with Kiwi journalist Jon Stevenson.

The camp – near the Crystal Hotel in Kabul – is home to around 300 families, each consisting on average of nine people. It is separated from a motorway by a large ditch which, judging from the strong smell of sulphur, contained raw sewage. We were directed over a rickety bridge to see the last sack of aid being carried away.

A friend from the UK had just delivered (with the help of the camp elders) £2,175 worth of aid: a lorry full of fire wood, 3 tonnes of sugar, tea, and bread-making flour – all bought from a local wholesale market a few hours before.

I was to learn that the camp had recently doubled in size as the municipal authorities in Kabul had just evicted a similar-sized camp near the Kabul stadium.

January is the worst time of year with the health hazards of pneumonia, TB and ‘flu. The little work the men do get also dries up.

The camp rarely receives visitors, let alone foreigners, and this – coupled with the aid delivery – had created a euphoric mood, especially among the children. By the time I started to walk around the camp a small bunch of girls had latched onto me as the honoured guest. They greeted me warmly with big smiles and hugs, I’m not sure who they thought I was but it felt like my status was close to Mother Teresa.

In hindsight the aid was perfectly timed as when I woke the next morning Kabul was covered with snow. I immediately thought about the people I’d met at the camp, the children without shoes walking over heaps of rubbish (which included used needles), the mud huts

with little or no means of cooking, let alone heating. My heart was with them and the 450,000 IDPs who didn't receive aid the day before.

In 2011 Refugees International reported that air strikes and night raids by US/NATO forces were destroying homes, crops and infrastructure, traumatizing civilians and displacing tens of thousands of people.

I was in the camp for less than an hour, though in hindsight it seems much longer. The lovely refugee girls each gave me a round of hugs and then another and another. One of them clung onto me. I could sense their feelings of desperation. They obviously viewed me as some sort of saviour and as I drove away in the car, I guess for them, so did a piece of hope.

Only two weeks earlier, the chief of the UN's Refugee Agency (UNHCR) Peter Nicholaus stated that their policy towards Afghan refugees over the last 10 years had been the "biggest mistake UNHCR ever made", largely because they encouraged the millions of refugees who had fled abroad to return. Those who did are now, in the main, jobless, homeless and living in some of the poorest conditions in the world.

In the camp a widow, Medina, had pleaded with me to tell the people of Britain about their plight: no food, no blankets and no means to cook.

While the US/NATO have been able to find over \$500bn to fight their war, only a tiny fraction of this sum has been used to meet genuine human needs, with the result that millions of Afghans still routinely face hunger and disease.

On behalf of Medina I sent out a press release and letters to the UK media, transmitting a stark warning to the rest of the world: refugees across Afghanistan urgently need aid otherwise deaths this winter will rocket. Sadly, as subsequent media reports confirmed, I was right¹.

¹ 'Driven away by a war, now stalked by winter's cold', New York Times, 3 February 2012



Why are we in Afghanistan?

I've yet to attend a meeting about the war where this question isn't raised. However, the answer – we're there because the US is – never satisfies people, as the question they really want answered is "Why is the US in Afghanistan?" The best response to this question appears in the book *Bleeding Afghanistan*¹.

The authors highlight two persuasive factors to explain the invasion: maintaining 'credibility' and creating a stepping stone to Iraq.

Failure to respond militarily would have sent the wrong message around the world, and the Taliban – who had sheltered bin Laden – were a useful proxy for the amorphous network behind the 9/11 attacks, which could not be directly attacked.

¹ 'Bleeding Afghanistan: Washington, Warlords and the Propaganda of Silence', Seven Stories Press, 2006

At the time, Charles Krauthammer – later named by the FT as “the most influential commentator” in America – wrote: “If... the United States... cannot succeed in defeating some cave dwellers in the most backward country on earth, then the entire structure of world stability, which rests ultimately on the pacifying deterrent effect of American power, will be fatally threatened.”

Following 9/11 the Bush administration debated Iraq for four days before concluding that Afghanistan would be a more publicly acceptable target, with Bush telling his Cabinet: “Start with bin Laden, which Americans expect. And if we succeed, we’ve struck a blow and can move forward [to Iraq]”.

Crucially, neither the capture of bin Laden nor the prevention of future terrorist attacks were ever central priorities for either the US or British governments.

The US has remained in Afghanistan since 2001 – and its current plans envisage maintaining an estimated 25,000 troops on the ground after 2014 – for a variety of reasons.

Several long-term interests are served by the continued US presence, such as providing a rationale for NATO’s existence, and positioning US power in the heart of Asia. And, as in Iraq, there are people and corporations with significant influence on foreign policy who benefit from the war’s continuation, financially or otherwise.

As with the original invasion – which took place despite dire warnings from international aid agencies regarding the likely humanitarian impact, and which may have resulted in over 10,000 deaths as the bombing disrupted vital aid supplies and forced hundreds of thousands to flee their homes² – the consequences for ordinary Afghans are of little or no concern to those making the policies.

2 ‘Forgotten Victims’, Guardian, 20 May 2002



Most Afghans don’t want war, but most Afghans – and this was borne out by my own limited experience in the country – also fear the Taliban, and do not want them to reconquer the country.

These two facts probably account for two longstanding – and striking – features of the many national opinion polls that have been conducted in Afghanistan: support for the continuation of the US/NATO presence; and support for negotiations with the Taliban to end the war.

For example, in a December 2009 BBC poll, 68% of Afghans said that they either “strongly” or “somewhat” supported the presence of US military forces in Afghanistan, while 65% (rising to nearly 75% in the South and 91% in the East) backed peace talks¹.

Of course, Afghanistan is a war zone, so all polling there needs to be taken with (at least) a pinch of salt. Nonetheless, it seems to me that these figures do need to be taken seriously.

However, these national figures fail to reveal crucial regional variations. So, while 68% of Afghans supported the presence of US

1 Poll of Afghan opinion, 11–23 December 2009, tinyurl.com/bbcafganpoll

forces nationally, in the south and the east – where the fighting was heaviest – only 42% did. In other words, there was far less support for the war among those at its sharp end.

And it's no coincidence that the south and the east are predominantly Pashtun – the ethnic group, comprising roughly 42% of Afghanistan's population, from which the Taliban draws most, if not all, of its recruits.

In effect, we have taken sides in Afghanistan's long civil war, and current US strategy – which involves rapidly training an “Afghan” army dominated by non-Pashtuns, to fight a predominantly Pashtun insurgency - looks set to further increase sectarian strife.²

No-one should be deceived by the polls into supporting such an outcome.

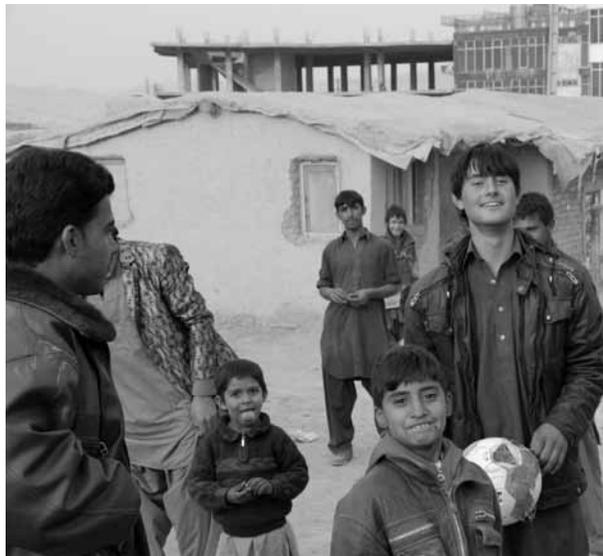


Photo by Jon Stevenson

2 'US surge will only prolong Afghan war', Independent, 6 December 2009

→ In a 2011 survey by the (pro-war) International Council on Security and Development, 69% of men in southern Afghanistan blamed US/NATO forces for the most civilian deaths. In Sangin district in Helmand province – handed over by British forces to US control in 2010 – an astonishing 99% of interviewees thought that NATO military operations were “bad for the Afghan people”.



Photo by Jon Stevenson

Saving Afghan Women?

→ 2,400 Afghan women set fire to themselves each year – mostly to escape abusive and violent family lives.
Source: 'Ghosts of Afghanistan' by Jonathan Steele, Portobello, 2012

→ Each year 24,000 Afghan women die due to complications in pregnancy - the worst maternal mortality rate in the world.
Source: UNAMA; WHO

When giving talks about the situation in Afghanistan, there is always the inevitable question about women. After all, weren't Afghan women “liberated” by the 2001 invasion, and wouldn't withdrawing our troops now mean abandoning them?

As usual with Afghanistan, the reality is more complex. In Kabul I saw young women in figure-hugging clothing, make-up and loose scarves walking past completely-covered burqa-clad women – but Kabul is hardly representative of the country as a whole.

In 2009, a UN report¹ noted that while “rhetoric and empty promises expressing concerns about the plight of Afghan women are common...

1 'Silence is Violence: End the Abuse of Women in Afghanistan', July 2009, tinyurl.com/silenceviolence

deeply engrained discrimination... effectively condemns the majority of Afghan women to feudal-like conditions.”

There have been few improvements on the ground since then.

This grim picture should come as no surprise, as much of the country is currently controlled either by the Taliban (whose record on women’s rights hardly needs repeating) or by the brutal warlords the US brought to power after the 2001 invasion.

The latter, it should be recalled, were responsible for one of the darkest chapters in the history of Afghan women, namely the 1992–1996 civil war, whose viciousness contributed to the emergence of the Taliban.

Given these ugly realities, it’s unclear that conditions for most Afghan women would radically deteriorate following a withdrawal, unless the country descends into a major civil war. A negotiated settlement with the Taliban – favoured by most Afghans, but long blocked by the US/UK (see pages 35–36) – is probably the best way of avoiding such an outcome.



Photo by Jon Stevenson

“Freedom, democracy and justice cannot be enforced at gunpoint by a foreign country; they are the values that can be achieved only by our people and democracy-loving forces through a hard, decisive and long struggle”

Afghan women’s rights activist, Zoya

→ In 2010, the then-CIA Director, Leon Panetta, claimed that there were “maybe 50 to 100” al Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan, “maybe less”.

Making us safe?

According to David Cameron, Britain’s mission in Afghanistan can be summed up in “two words”: “It is about our national security back in the UK... making sure this country is safe and secure”.

My beloved sister Myfanwy was almost killed in the 7/7 bombings, forced to walk along the tube track to escape, after her train exploded. But this doesn’t prevent me from seeing that Cameron’s claim is complete rubbish.

Richard Barrett – who formerly headed counter-terrorism for MI6, and now leads the UN’s Al-Qaida and Taliban Monitoring Team – responded to Cameron, saying: “I’ve never heard such nonsense... I’m quite sure if there were no foreign troops in Afghanistan, there’d be less agitation in Leeds, or wherever, about... what western intentions are in Afghanistan and Pakistan.”¹

Nor is he alone in this assessment.

Indeed, former Kabul CIA station chief Graham Fuller notes that: “Al-Qaida’s threat no longer emanates from the caves of the borderlands [between Afghanistan and Pakistan], but from its symbolism... few Pashtuns (the ethnic group to which most Taliban members belong) on either side of the (Afghanistan/Pakistan) border will long maintain a radical and international jihadi perspective once the incitement of the U.S. presence is gone. Nobody on either side of the border really wants it.”

1 ‘Kandahar strategy draws criticism’, FT, 13 June 2010



Photo by Jon Stevenson

In a similar vein, Dr Robert Lambert – who headed the UK’s counter-terrorist Muslim Contact Unit from 2002–07 – notes: “What the [7/7] bombers did, and what Al-Qaida does successfully, is to exploit widely held grievances. That should not be difficult to grasp. The last government spent most of the last five years denying that, looking for other narratives to explain what had happened. All this is happening under the shadow of military action ... with terrorist groups planning to legitimise their attacks in the UK on the basis of what is happening in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

Fortunately, most ordinary people already understand this: a March 2012 poll found that a majority (55%) of Britons thought that the threat of terrorism on British soil was actually increased by British forces remaining in Afghanistan, with only 21% disagreeing.²

² ‘Three-quarters of public believe war in Afghanistan is unwinnable’, Independent, 13 March 2012

→ **Numerous Government officials – past and present – have been involved in the drugs trade e.g. President Karzai’s half-brother, and former Governor of Kandahar, Ahmed Wali Karzai; the former head of the Counternarcotics Police of Afghanistan, Mohammed Daud Daud; and the current Vice President, Mohammad Fahim.**



One afternoon we went for a walk to a nearby river, now more or less dry except for a murky trickle that wriggles a path through piles of rubbish.

In the ’70s people used to swim and fish there but severe droughts have caused water levels to drop by 10 metres over the last 10 years. Roughly 12 feet deep, the basin has become a hang-out for local drug addicts.

As we got close we could see a group of around 50 men – completely in the open and without inhibition or self-respect – getting high on heroin. Many of them were black with grime, with beaten-up weathered faces and lost eyes.

Hakim told me that the previous week a dead body had been pulled out and left on the side. Apparently, many Afghan men travel to Iran for work and become addicted during periods of unemployment. When they come back they turn to crime to maintain their habit. The whole scene was totally depressing. Hakim turned to me: “The human race is not coping. It’s gone so wrong”.

A possible peace

While I was in Kabul, the Taliban declared that it had reached a deal with the Gulf State of Qatar to open an office in Doha.

Former EU envoy to Afghanistan, Michael Semple described the announcement as “completely game-changing”, noting that it was clear that the Taliban’s leadership (among whom he has close contacts) were on board, and that it was “realistic to think there could be a ceasefire in 2012.”

Negotiations to end the war could provide a real alternative to the current carnage, but have long been opposed by the US and Britain – not least because of the clash with its plans “to maintain a large clandestine presence in Iraq and Afghanistan long after the departure of conventional U.S. troops as part of a plan by the Obama administration to rely on a combination of spies and Special Operations forces to protect U.S. interests.”¹



Tanks left after the Soviet invasion, 1979–89

1 ‘CIA digs in as Americans withdraw from Iraq, Afghanistan’, Washington Post, 8 February 2012

What do the Taliban want?

In May 2009 the New York Times reported the Taliban leadership’s (unofficial) demands:

- **an immediate pullback of US/NATO forces to their bases**
- **a ceasefire and phased 18-month withdrawal of foreign troops**
- **a peacekeeping force, drawn from predominantly Muslim nations, to replace the current occupation forces**
- **the formation of a transitional government**
- **nationwide elections after Western forces leave**

‘US Pullout a Condition in Afghan Peace Talks’, New York Times, 20 May 2009

Most ordinary Afghans support such negotiations (see pages 28–29), as do most people in the UK: in a March 2009 poll 66% of Britons said that the US/UK should be “willing to talk to the Taliban in Afghanistan in order to achieve a peace deal.”

Moreover, the evidence suggests that the Taliban have long been willing to negotiate, provided only that the US “indicates its willingness to provide a timetable for complete withdrawal”².

However, as this pamphlet goes to press (early November 2012) the US has refused the Taliban’s Doha olive branch, and the quick release of Taliban prisoners from Guantanamo Bay – deemed an essential first step in any genuine peace process – has not yet taken place, leading the Taliban to suspend their proto-talks with the Americans.

Peace is possible, but it is currently being blocked by the US, with British support. Whether this remains the case in 2013 will depend – at least in part – on the actions of peace activists around the world.

2 ‘Ex-PM Says Taliban Offer Talks For Pullout Date’, Inter Press Service, 28 July 2011

For more information

Books

Bleeding Afghanistan: Washington, Warlords and the Propaganda of Silence

by Sonali Kolhatkar and James Ingalls (Seven Stories, 2006)
Written by two US activists with a longstanding commitment to the country, this is a path-breaking book but only covers the pre-2006 period.

Ghosts of Afghanistan: The Haunted Battleground

by Jonathan Steele
(Portobello Books, 2011)

A comparison between the US and Soviet occupations forms the centrepiece of Guardian correspondent Steele's book. Very strong on negotiations. Probably the best single book for activists.

The Great Game: The Reality of Britain's War in Afghanistan

by Mark Curtis (War on Want, 2011)
Available for free download at tinyurl.com/curtisgreatgame

Exhibition

10 Years On

Touring exhibition of photos by independent journalist Guy Smallman.
Contact promos@peacenews.info or 01424 428 792 for more info on hosting it in your local area.

Web-sites

Voices for Creative Nonviolence

<http://vcnv.org>

Includes regular reports from Kathy Kelly and others, from peace movement delegations to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

RethinkAfghanistan.com

US site, based around a series of free films. Topics covered include civilian casualties, women's rights and the cost of the war.

Afghanistan Analysts Network

<http://aan-afghanistan.com/>

Invaluable source of independent, in-depth analysis from academics and journalists

Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers <http://ourjourneytosmile.com/blog/>

DroneWarsUK.wordpress.com

The place to go for all information on drones and the UK.

DroneCampaignNetwork.org.uk

Join the mailing list for regular updates on UK drones campaigning

Justice Not Vengeance

www.j-n-v.org

Includes archive of briefings on Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan, plus news on JNV's current projects.

Maya's blog

FromHastingsToKabul.wordpress.com

PeaceNews.info

Includes regular monthly updates on the war, as well as information on UK actions. Print version also available.