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The Afghan Toll

By Vijay Prashad

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The American war in Afghanistan will soon enter its 16th year. Over this period, the United States and its allies have lost close to 3,000 soldiers, while an unknown number of Afghans have died. The official figure for the Afghan dead, above 150,000, is laughable. Each year, as the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) finds, the percentage of women and children among the official death toll increases, many of the deaths a result of aerial bombardment.

Afghan sources say that the number of war dead must be near the million mark. The human toll has been considerable. In 2016, over half a million people fled their homes because of the conflict. This is the highest number of displacements since 2008. Of the estimated population of 32 million Afghans, almost two million have been displaced by the conflict; about three million are refugees from the almost 40 years of war in the country. In the five months that ended in May, UNAMA found that already 90,000 people had been displaced.

The “spring offensive” of the Taliban began with a burst. On April 21, a handful of Taliban fighters infiltrated the Afghan National Army’s 209th Corps base in Balkh, a province in

northern Afghanistan. They killed 140 Afghan soldiers. It was a devastating attack, which came a week after the U.S. dropped the 21,600-pound (9,798-kg) Mother of All Bombs (MOAB), the largest non-nuclear bomb in the world, on Nangarhar, Afghanistan. The bomb landed on the village of Asadkhel. The U.S. military said that 94 Islamic State fighters were killed. Journalists have not been permitted to the site, although it should be said that the district is home to 1.5 million people. It was as if the Taliban paid no heed to U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to drop "Madar-e Bamb-ha", the Dari translation of the grotesque device. The Balkh attack almost seemed as a directed snub. The Taliban now controls over 40 per cent of Afghanistan, with its hold cemented in north-eastern Helmand province, north-western Kandahar province, north-western Zabul province and Uruzgan province. Its forces could soon be in command of southern Afghanistan, which would put the Taliban in charge of the length of the country's border with Pakistan. The assassination of Taliban leaders seems to have barely dented its ability to push hard against the Afghan Army and the Army's North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies.

Dan Coats, the U.S. Director of National Intelligence, told the U.S. Senate that regardless of any action by the U.S., "the political and security situation in Afghanistan will almost certainly deteriorate through 2018". What he meant was that U.S. interests would not be met through the government of Ashraf Ghani and the security presence of the Afghan National Army. The Taliban is likely to continue to make gains. It is expected to seize a city in this "spring offensive" and consolidate its position through that tactical victory. The U.S. commander in Afghanistan, Army General John Nicholson, has called for an increase of several thousand troops. A leaked suggestion from the White House to send an additional 3,000 to 5,000 U.S. and other NATO troops followed swiftly. This leak came a month before Trump was to address NATO directly, which is to happen on May 25. Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull told Trump that he was "open" to sending additional troops to Afghanistan. NATO formally ended its combat mission in Afghanistan in 2014. There is hesitancy amongst its member states, apart from the U.S., to expand its presence in Afghanistan. Germany's Angela Merkel and Britain's Theresa May are uneasy with the prospect. Both face elections this year, and both know that the American war in Afghanistan is unpopular in their countries.

Silence in the U.S.

During the 2016 U.S. presidential election, neither Trump nor Hillary Clinton raised the matter of the American war in Afghanistan. The war has cost the U.S. at least \$23 billion a year, with an additional \$117 billion on reconstruction. Of that reconstruction money, 61 per cent, \$71 billion, went towards the creation of the Afghan National Army. The U.S.' surge in 2010, which brought 100,000 troops into the country, failed to stem the Taliban's drive. By 2014, that strategy was silently dropped. There was little discussion about it then. With the great loss of life on all sides, the waste of resources and the futility of U.S. war aims, one would have thought that the question of Afghanistan would have been raised in the debates or in the speeches. But there was virtual silence on it.

The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), a U.S. monitor for the money spent, has released 35 reports of considerable merit. They make for harrowing reading. They show that corruption has been endemic to the process of reconstruction. Little can be seen

for the billions of dollars spent to rebuild Afghanistan. Roads remain of poor quality and schools and medical clinics are promised but do not appear. In Balkh province, where the Taliban had attacked the Army base, the staff of SIGAR found that only 30 per cent of students who had been reported enrolled in schools were seen at any one time. Teachers were absent. Buildings erected with concrete “dissolved in rain” or had walls and roofs that collapsed.

The U.S. has spent at least \$8.5 billion in its counternarcotics campaign to end, effectively, opium production. But this has been utterly wasted. The drug trade is worth about \$1.56 billion and contributes almost 7.4 per cent to Afghanistan’s gross domestic product. The report SIGAR released in April showed that drug production increased by 43 per cent in 2016, with drug eradication “nearly imperceptible”. Opium cultivation increased by 10 per cent, with the main growth in regions where the Taliban is in control (Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan and Zabul). The U.S. says that 60 per cent of the Taliban’s funds come from the opium trade. At this point, 80 per cent of the world’s heroin comes from Afghan opium. There is no effective strategy to reduce the trade.

Strikingly, SIGAR notes that this corruption resides deep in the Afghan Army. On March 28, 2017, the Afghan Ministry of Defence fired 1,394 officials for corruption. In 2016, 35 per cent of the Afghan security forces were killed: 6,800 soldiers and police. SIGAR points out that “about 35% of the force does not reenlist each year”. The problems in the Afghan Army are deep: “unsustainable casualties, temporary losses of provincial and district centres, weakness in logistics and other functions, illiteracy in the ranks, often corrupt or inefficient leadership, and over-reliance on highly trained special forces for routine missions”.

No wonder that the Taliban has been making swift gains over the past few years. Its adversary is not prepared to contain its advance.

Trump’s surge

Matters are so grave that the Afghan government had to welcome warmly the old war dog Gulbuddin Hekmatyar of the Hizb-e Islami, who was known as the “Butcher of Kabul” for his siege of Kabul between 1992 and 1996. Considered a serial violator of human rights, Hekmatyar is now back as a player in the Kabul political scene. On May 13, Hekmatyar met former Afghan president Hamid Karzai to talk about the increased death of civilians. Karzai, at the end of his presidency, began to be critical of the U.S. style of warfare in Afghanistan. He argued that the night raids and the aerial attacks killed more innocent civilians than combatants. Karzai has since become bolder with his pronouncements and is one of the most vocal protesters against the use of the MOAB on his country. He said that it “is a brutal act against innocent people.... A bomb of that magnitude has consequences for the environment, for our lives, for our plants, for our water, for our soil—this is poison.” The meeting of Karzai and Hekmatyar suggests the formation of a new anti-American pole inside the Kabul political class.

It is in this context that Trump’s White House has suggested an increase in U.S. troops in the country. H.R. McMaster, Trump’s National Security Adviser, hastily noted that there had been no decision yet to increase troop levels. McMaster, who was instrumental in the 2007 Iraq surge,

is aware that in the White House a potential troop increase is already being called “McMaster’s War”. If it fails, the blame will be on him. If it succeeds, Trump will certainly take the credit.

It is unlikely that even an increase of 5,000 U.S. troops will have an impact on the Taliban’s rush towards Kabul. The style of U.S. warfare is likely to increase civilian casualties, and the deterioration of the Afghan National Army will not raise the population’s confidence. The Taliban, which had been delegitimised for its cruel rule 20 years ago, has now positioned itself once more as the only viable force to bring stability to the country. The reality of this is clear to many in U.S. intelligence. The return of the Taliban would be a major blow to U.S. prestige, the worst U.S. military defeat since Vietnam. Every contingency will be taken to prevent that outcome, even the destruction of Afghanistan