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Counting the Dead in Afghanistan

Robert Dreyfuss
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Amid the latest news from the war in Afghanistan—battles over Koran burnings, with members of the Afghan parliament [calling for “jihad”](#) against Americans and [convoluted talks about talks](#) between the United States, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Taliban—it’s important to remember that the war has caused untold casualties among civilians and the innocent, including children. In the last few weeks, there have been important reminders: a brilliant *New York Times* series of the deaths of dozens of children in a frozen refugee camp near Kabul, a devastating air strike by NATO that slaughtered eight children, and a terrific article in the *Washington Post* on the somber business of identifying, hauling and burying Afghanistan’s often anonymous civilian victims.

On February 3, the *Times* began what turned out to be an investigative series by Rod Nordland that depicted horrific conditions at a refugee camp for Afghans driven out of the areas where the war is most intense. The [article](#) began:

The following children froze to death in Kabul over the past three weeks after their families had fled war zones in Afghanistan for refugee camps here.

In all, it said, at least twenty-two children died in January and early February alone, and it asked:

After 10 years of a large international presence, comprising about 2,000 aid groups, at least \$3.5 billion of humanitarian aid and \$58 billion of development assistance, how could children be dying of something as predictable—and manageable—as the cold?

The article sparked outrage, initial denials from then incompetent government of Afghanistan, and outpourings of private aid. A [follow-up piece](#) by Nordland two days later said, in part:

The refugees' biggest concerns are lack of food and firewood. Everything else is secondary. Few of the children have coats or warm clothes of any kind, other than the occasional ragged sweater. Most do not have socks, and shoes are often little more than plastic sandals.

Three days later, Nordland wrote [a piece almost too difficult to read](#) about a single family that had lost eight of its nine children, including a 3-month-old infant named Khan, to the cold and harsh conditions:

“After we had dinner he was crying all night of the cold,” Mr. Mohammad said. The family had no wood and was huddling a small portion of paper and plastic that his daughter had scavenged that day. He said the boy had seemed healthy and was breast-feeding normally, though the family's dinner consisted only of tea and bread. But he kept crying. “Finally we started a fire, but it wasn't enough,” Mr. Mohammad said. By 1 a.m. the boy was stiff and lifeless, he said.

Even by the standards of destitution in these camps, Mr. Mohammad's story is a hard-luck one; Khan was the eighth of his nine children to die.

Even as Khan's family buried the eighth of its offspring, eight more children perished in a single air strike in Kapisa Province in eastern Afghanistan, more anonymous casualties of the ten-and-a-half-year war to nowhere. The incident followed the usual pattern: first revealed by President Karzai in an angry [announcement](#), then a haphazard investigation by NATO, Afghan officials and others, with the *Times* [noting](#):

Seven boys under 14 and an 18-year-old were killed in the attack, according to Abdul Mubin Safi, the administrative director of Kapisa Province. They were herding sheep less than half a mile from their homes when the bombing happened.

With NATO still refusing to admit responsibility, a [report](#) from an Afghan investigating committee concluded that the children were killed while grazing sheep and goats, and an eyewitness account in the *Times* [said](#):

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.

“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 the UN](#), 3,021 civilians died in Afghanistan in 2011, 410 from NATO air strikes and other violence and 2,332 from IEDs, suicide bombs and other violence from the Taliban and insurgent groups, with an additional 279 dying from violence that could not be attributed to either side.

In the *Post* [story](#), which pulls back the veil on a little-seen aspect of the war, a man named Abdul Hakim, a taxi driver and intermediary between officials and the Taliban, is shown going about the somber business of ensuring the hundreds of dead civilians, police officers and others are cared for properly, under Islamic law, and buried. A small excerpt from the must-read story:

In the past six years, [Abdul Malik] has done it 127 times, carrying letters of permission from both the Afghan government and the Taliban as he weaves through Kandahar in a beat-up yellow taxicab, with dead insurgents in the trunk. Black bags for those killed in firefights. Small wooden boxes for what’s left of suicide bombers....

Several times a month, a NATO helicopter deposits insurgents’ bodies at a mortuary next to Kandahar Airfield, where they are checked for unexploded bombs and placed in the same room

as US war dead. A flag-wrapped coffin for the Americans and a plywood box for the insurgents sit side by side.

The International Committee of the Red Cross then takes the remains of the insurgents, along with a file of information about them—photographs, a description of how each was killed—to Mirwais Hospital in Kandahar city. In the morgue’s register, they are identified by their job title, written simply as “Talib.”

The insurgents often share space in the Mirwais morgue with their victims, also transported by the ICRC. The grim toll emerges in the morgue’s register: President Hamid Karzai’s brother, the mayor of Kandahar and dozens of civilians, police officers and insurgents have been kept in the white refrigerated trailer, imported from Denmark, over the past seven months. A pile of clothes, stripped from the dead, lies nearby.

On a single day earlier this year, according to the register, four police officers were killed in an explosion, a shopkeeper was shot dead and a district governor was assassinated. About 150 bodies come through the Mirwais morgue each month.

On the register, next to the names of the dead, family members have scrawled their signatures or, in the case of the illiterate, left blue thumbprints as a record of who took the remains for burial. But next to the names of Talibs, the same man has signed dozens of times: Abdul Hakim.

The war goes on.