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International Peace Day from Kabul, Afghanistan

By johnny-barber

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On this International Day of Peace I am sitting in Kabul, Afghanistan with a handful of youth that want nothing but peaceful coexistence in their lives. This in some respects is like a dream because their entire lives have been surrounded by war, death, corruption, and struggle. Peace has been in short supply. For three years the Afghan Peace Volunteers have worked to develop friendships across ethnic lines in Kabul and various provinces throughout Afghanistan. The work has been difficult, trust is hard to come by in this war torn land, but they are adamant that non-violence is the only way forward. I have sat with similar groups in the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, Iraq, America and Israel. Rarely are their voices heard over the drums of war.

Established in 1981, by the United Nations General Assembly, the International Day of Peace was to coincide with its opening session. The first Peace Day was observed on September 21st, 1982. In 1982 the Soviet Union was increasing its troop presence in Afghanistan and facing fierce fighting throughout the provinces.

Thirty years later Afghanistan is still at war. The opponents have changed, and the weaponry has changed. The War on Terror, Armored Humvees, IED's, suicide bombers, night raids, smart bombs, and drones have all entered the American lexicon.

The constant through all these years is the suffering of the non-combatants. Just this week, a van was blown up by an IED in southern Helmand province, killing 9 women and 3 children. No group has claimed responsibility for the blast. A drone strike before dawn in Laghman Province killed 8 women gathering firewood and injured 8 more. I spoke with a father of six children in

Parwansa refugee camp. He has been an Internally Displaced Person for 11 years, living in a small mud-brick enclosure with a plastic, canvas, and cardboard roof. I asked if the government had offered any assistance for the coming winter. He said the government has done nothing; he could only count on God to take care of his family. Oct 7th will mark the 11th anniversary of America's war in Afghanistan. 11 years and \$550 billion dollars later, peace is still elusive.

The war has pushed the Taliban out of power, but the current government is full of the very same warlords that were carving up Afghanistan prior to the Taliban's rise. These "representatives" have very little backing among the people, mainly because they have continued to line their pockets while their constituents suffer. The call for peace may fill their speeches, but to work for peace distracts from their income.

The International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) as well as the Afghan Army and Afghan Police force, often employing strong-arm tactics, struggle to bring a semblance of security to the countryside. Security in Kabul is tentative as well, with suicide bombings and armed attacks on the rise. On Sept 18th, a woman rammed a car full of explosives into a van containing 9 foreign workers, killing herself, all 9 foreigners, their Afghan translator, as well as passerby. While temporary security may be imposed with an iron fist, peace cannot be forced.

On Sept 19th, an Afghan holiday in the remembrance of the death of Burhanuddin Rabbani, a warlord turned "peace envoy" who was killed by a suicide bomber in his home, President Hamid Karzai called on Afghans to pursue peace. A generation that has known nothing but war has little faith in government calls for peace while the very same government loots the country. The government led peace initiative seems to have died with Rabbani a year ago.

The past week has been disastrous for Afghans, and points towards more mayhem in the future. While profits are still being generated for arms suppliers, reconstruction experts, and contractors, peace has not been generated for anyone. In America, peace is never spoken of outside the context of war or security. In Obama's acceptance speech in Charlotte, he mentioned America's "pursuit of peace" exactly once, shortly after getting cheers for claiming, "Osama bin Laden is dead."

A partial list of American military involvement since 1982 includes Lebanon, Grenada, Chad, Libya, Honduras, Bolivia, Columbia, Peru, Philippines, Panama, Iraq, Kuwait, Somalia, Bosnia, Macedonia, Haiti, Serbia, Afghanistan (currently, America's longest war), Sudan, Iraq (again, after years of crippling sanctions that killed half a million children), and Libya (again). This is not an exhaustive list; it doesn't include covert attacks, special operations, or America's special relationship with Israel, which has rained down horror on Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza. Israeli drones continue to kill people in Gaza on a nearly weekly basis. American drones are currently killing people in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. Syria and Iran loom on the horizon, with American threats of intervention and war ramping up. Death is a top American export.

On the anniversary of Sept 11th, a hate filled Anti-Islam movie trailer was a catalyst sparking widespread protests and attacks across the world, leading to 30 deaths. On Sept 19th a French Satirical newspaper, under the guise of "free speech" released vulgar cartoons of the Prophet

Mohammad (Peace be Upon Him) adding fuel to an already volatile fire. Peace Day is likely to be fraught with violence, like most any other day.

Yet, on this International Day of Peace groups will come together around the world (and yes, even in Afghanistan) to promote peace, cooperation, friendship and love. These efforts are necessary, if for no other reason then to remind people peace is an option, a possibility, and a personal responsibility. It is necessary to counter the flames of hatred. It is necessary to be inspired by those who walked this path before us. It is necessary for our sanity as human beings. As the darkness of our violence prone world threatens to overwhelm us, it is necessary to dance, to sing, to laugh, and to open our minds to creative opportunities to live in harmony with our world. It is necessary to stand together for even just one day and say, “No, just because you have superior firepower, or can rain down hell fire missiles, or fly planes into buildings, I will not be swayed, I will not live in fear. Your sickness will not persuade me, infect me, or deter me.” In this electoral season, choosing between Obama and Romney is a huge distraction; there is real work to be done. Our perverse system of endless war needs to be dismantled, our culture realigned. We need to begin again. War is over. Peace is the path.