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## The Afghan war: What is the point?

By Solomon Hughes

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For what cause are British soldiers and Afghan civilians dying in "Operation Moshtarak?" There is no doubt they are dying. The third British soldier to be killed fell last week.

By the time this is published he may already have been joined by more of his comrades.

Moshtarak means "together." And Afghan civilians are joining British troops in death.

Nato admits that at least 19 civilians have been killed in operation Moshtarak - a dozen by mistargeted rocket attacks, the rest by crossfire.

The killings will not end the Afghan conflict or solve Afghanistan's problems. This point was made clear by US General William Caldwell, the man in charge of training the Afghan National Army and police. He is in charge of the "exit strategy" because according to current plans Nato troops will continue killing and dying until Afghan forces are judged ready to take over.

Speaking to Radio 4's Today Programme, Caldwell said - and it is an unusual thing for a general to admit - that war is not the answer.

"In fact there is no military solution to this challenge in Afghanistan," he said.

"The military can only enable a political solution. And so the political dimension that is ongoing is actually paramount. It is critical to the overall success."

So what is the political solution? Thanks to Washington Post reporter Rajiv Chandrasekaran, we have a clearer idea.

Chandrasekaran uncovered the pretensions and dreams of the Green Zone in Iraq in his book *Imperial Life In The Emerald City*. Now he is doing the same for Afghanistan.

Chandrasekaran's report from Afghanistan describes the arrival of the new mayor of Marjah, Haji Zahir.

The small town of Marjah was one of the main targets in Operation Moshtarak.

Zahir has lived in Germany for most of the past 15 years. He was elected by being flown into town aboard a US marines Osprey aircraft - a kind of cross between a plane and a helicopter.

The only voters seem to have been the contingent of marines in his security detail. Chandrasekaran says Zahir addressed 50 or so locals at a bazaar at his inauguration, but he never travelled more than 100 metres from the Nato warplane.

His message was not popular. You'd think you would have to try hard to be less popular than the desperate and brutal Taliban.

But after nearly a decade of intervention, Nato has made it. Chandrasekaran reports that a local tractor-driver told the mayor: "The Taliban provided us with a very peaceful environment, they did not bother us. We were very happy with them here."

The Taliban won local support because "they were not corrupt like the police."

Another local revealed the secret of Taliban success. He preferred them to the US because "your government drops bombs on us."

Zahir did his best to show democracy's virtues. This was difficult, as he had not been elected. But he did give all the locals in the market a \$5 mobile phone card.

Assuming unelected imports won't buy political stability with phone credits, the remaining war strategy seems to be grinding against the Taliban until it is weak enough to be negotiated into a settlement with more favoured warlords.

Afghan civilians and Nato troops will continue to be chewed up by the gears of this war machine until we can stop it. So the anti-war movement's call to negotiate a settlement is now even more vital.

Calling for more anti-war protest isn't easy. So much energy and time protesting against the Iraq war means there is understandable weariness.

But there is still a real opening. A political crisis over continued involvement in Afghanistan is bubbling under across Nato.

A few months ago Germany's defence minister was forced to resign over responsibility for Afghan civilian deaths.

Now the Dutch government has collapsed over its involvement in the Afghan mission. Canada has an ongoing political scandal over its troops' complicity in abuse.

The combination of hopelessness and violence in the Afghan mission can cause outbreaks of popular opposition to feed the anti-war movement.