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Afghan civilians bear brunt of 10-year war

By Subel Bhandari

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Kabul - For as long as Shamsadullah Khan can remember, Afghanistan has been at war.

'War came to my house a long time ago,' the 40-year-old father of three says. Lately however, the 'meaning of war has been lost in the blur of increasing violence.'

'What are we still fighting for?' Khan asks as American soldiers pass by in a convoy. 'Why are they still here?'

The United States has been fighting the insurgency in Afghanistan since 2001 when they ousted the Taliban from government for refusing to hand over al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, who ordered the terrorist attacks on the US in September 2001.

In the beginning, many Afghans, including Khan, supported the US invasion.

'When they first came, I was one of the guys who stood by the roadside with my daughter and waved at them,' he says.

'But it's been 10 years since that day and we have seen absolutely no progress, peace or security.'

Instead, life has become more violent, with complex and coordinated Taliban attacks in recent months, including one on the US embassy and NATO headquarters in Khan's neighbourhood last month.

Khan and his family were holed up inside their house for 20 hours.

He said it was a stark reminder of 'painful times' during the 1990s civil war, when rival warlords fought to control Kabul, shelling the city night and day, killing about 65,000 people.

The embassy attack killed 15 Afghans and no foreigners but the assault fulfilled the Taliban objective of sowing fear among the general public.

'If Kabul is not safe, where is?' Khan asks.

In Afghanistan, more than half of the population is under 18 and too young to remember clearly the Taliban regime.

In the decade since the invasion, some things have changed for the better. Millions of children, including girls, are now in school. Women can work and walk around freely. New properties and businesses have sprouted around the country.

But international forces from 49 contributing countries have not been able to crush the Taliban resurgence that is fast spreading to previously peaceful areas.

The country still stands as one of the poorest in the world. Government is weak, effective administration is limited to the cities and corruption is rampant.

Afghan security forces command very little trust or popularity among the locals. Most improvements to security remain fragile.

The United Nations said last week that Afghanistan was witnessing 'considerable political volatility and disconcerting levels of insecurity,' with average monthly 'security incidents' up by 39 per cent through August, compared to the same period in 2010.

The statistic contradicts what coalition military officials, who have been charting a decrease in security incidents, describe as 'fragile and reversible gains.'

Civilians suffer the brunt of the conflict.

The UN said the first six months of the year were the deadliest for Afghan civilians since the overthrow of the Taliban. In May alone, 368 were killed, the highest monthly total since 2001.

The public has become more cynical about the ongoing war, and bitter about the presence of foreign forces.

Even though two-thirds of civilian deaths are attributed to insurgents, those at the hands of international troops spark the most outrage among the local populace.

The night raids and airstrikes by the foreign military have angered even President Hamid Karzai, who has asked international troops to stop such operations.

'Afghans are furious with the Special Forces operations, especially the night raids and airstrikes,' said Bejan Ahmad, a student at Ketab College in Kabul.

'They have killed and jailed innocent people,' Ahmad said. 'They do not have any respect for Afghan customs when they come to our houses.'

'People are angry because the Americans have killed babies in airstrikes,' said Ahmad, a native of Nangarhar province who left because of the war.

Military officials insist the tactics are an important part of counter-insurgency strategy.

Anti-Western sentiment is on the rise. Afghans who initially welcomed the foreign troops are now distancing themselves from the intervention.

'What I fail to understand is why the super powerful America cannot end this insurgency,' Ahmad said.

Last month, Taliban gunmen warned tribal elders at his village in Batikot district against sending young girls to school.

They told the elders to make them study religious books in their homes instead.

'They also told boys to not shave off their beards and to wear Islamic dress,' Ahmad said. 'There is no government in villages to stop all this.'

'America's war on terror has been a real terror for Afghan civilians on daily basis.'