

Media's Indifference to Afghan Crisis

By David Edwards

Why is the mainstream media ignoring the mass death of Afghan civilians?

It is a long-standing tradition of free-press reporting to glare intensely at atrocities committed by 'them' while flashing the briefest of glances at atrocities committed by 'us.' Cognitive dissonance is a necessary feature of this kind of reporting, as when the world's richest country resolves to bomb the world's poorest country as part of a 'war for civilisation.'

For much of the media, the war in Afghanistan ended with the fall of Kabul on 13 November 2001. As usual, the reporting was focused on the hideous crimes of others, and on our need to destroy the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. With the goal (partially) achieved, journalists declared another glorious humanitarian victory and moved on. Suddenly, the war in Afghanistan was yesterday's news, although not for the civilians killed in the continuing bombardment. A different story—the price of our 'victory' for the people of Afghanistan—threatened to turn the spotlight on our crimes. So, this was ignored by our media, in accordance with long-standing tradition. The sheer scale of what has been so casually passed over is extraordinary.

A careful reader of the press might discover that Afghan casualties of the bombing now exceed the loss of life on 11 September. But this 'collateral damage' represents a small fraction of the total horror inflicted on

Afghanistan. On 16 September, the press reported that the U.S. government had demanded that Pakistan stop the truck convoys of food on which much of the already starving Afghan population depended. In late September, the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation warned that more than seven million people were facing a crisis that could lead to widespread starvation if military action were initiated. There would be 'humanitarian catastrophe' unless aid was immediately resumed and the threat of military action terminated. Dominic Nutt of Christian Aid warned: "It's as if a mass grave has been dug behind millions of people. We can drag them back from it or push them in. We could be looking at millions of deaths."¹

It is interesting to imagine a coalition launching an attack to root out terrorism in, say, France, on the understanding that some seven million French civilians might lose their lives as a result. Remarkably, though the

media communicated these aid agency's warnings of impending mass death, and the need to pause bombing before the snows came, the story simply disappeared.

How many did die when the snows came? How many of the seven million were "pushed" into the mass grave? Certainly our government—the 'moral crusaders' of Kosovo—showed no interest in raising such questions, for obvious reasons. Likewise, the fate of millions of innocents imperilled by state policy has been a matter of supreme indifference to our media. We can gain a sense of the moral health of our democracy from the minimal coverage that has emerged.

On 3 January, in a small article on page 14, *The Guardian* reported conditions facing 350,000 Afghan refugees in the Maslakh camp, 30 miles west of Herat city. Doug McKinlay described how 100 refugees were dying every day of exposure and starvation (a disaster on the scale of 11 September every month). The small size of the graves in the graveyards on the edge of the camp was "clear evidence that most of the buried are children," McKinlay noted.²

Ian Lethbridge, executive director of the charity Feed the Children, said: "I always judge everything by what I have seen in Africa. And this



RAWA distributed foodstuff among displaced people in Maslakh camp in Heart province west of Afghanistan.

is on the scale of Africa. I was shocked at the living conditions of the new arrivals.”³

No aid was reaching these 350,000 people. One woman at the camp confronted McKinlay: “You are just taking pictures. You are not here to help. We can’t eat pictures. We are dying. We need food and medicine.”

Conditions outside the Maslakh camp were more horrific still. On 4 January, Christian Aid reported: “Refugees arriving at Maslakh camp near Herat have described the ‘calamity conditions’ their families are now living in. Heavy snowfall is making it difficult to transport humanitarian supplies to the most vulnerable areas of the mountainous Ghor province of Afghanistan.”⁴

Hayat Fazil of Christian Aid partner organisation Norwegian Project Office/Rural Rehabilitation Association for Afghanistan, warned that rural villages were being neglected while refugee camps like Maslakh got the lion’s share of aid.

About these catastrophes, the major broadcast media, Independent Television News (ITN) and British Broadcasting Corp. (BBC) TV, has said nothing so far. To my knowledge, the BBC’s sole reference to the plight of Afghan refugees consists of a documentary filmed in November 2001 on the 5,000-plus refugees in Makaki camp.⁵ But conditions in Makaki, though appalling, did not approach the horror of Maslakh and elsewhere. In the BBC film, Dr. Pauline Horrill of *Médecins sans Frontières* reported

three child deaths in Makaki over a five-day period.

The BBC’s main rival, ITN, did report on the misery in Afghanistan. On 9, 13, 22 and 26 January, ITN reported the story of Marjan, the one-eyed lion in Kabul zoo. Marjan’s “battered image touched people around the world,” we were told on the 9 January, “his plight a symbol of maltreatment under the Taliban.” As a result, a team of veterinarians flew out to deliver “much-needed help, treatment and food.”⁶ The closing clip featured a happy Marjan chewing on a large piece of meat.

We could discover what was being eaten elsewhere in Afghanistan on that day in one of *The Guardian*’s rare reports: “The village of Bonavash is

slowly starving,” Ravi Nessman wrote. “Besieged by the Taliban and crushed by years of drought, people in this remote mountain settlement have resorted to eating bread made from grass and traces of barley flour. Babies whose mothers’ milk had dried up are fed grass porridge. The toothless elderly crush grass into a near powder. Many have died. More are sick. Nearly everyone has diarrhea or hacking cough. When the children’s pain becomes unbearable, their mothers tie rags around their stomachs to try to alleviate the pressure.”⁷

“We are waiting to die. If food does not come, if the situation does not change, we will eat it [grass]...until we die,” said Ghulam Raza, 42, a man with a hacking cough, pain in his stomach and bleeding bowels.⁸

Nessman related the story of Khadabaksh, a former farm labourer, who looked in despair at his four young daughters: “Three weeks ago, his children had a mother and a baby sister. Both have died. Khadabaksh begs his neighbours for pinches of their small amount of home-grown barley so his family can make grass bread. ‘It is better to die in our house,’” he said, “not in some strange place with strange people.”

Again, about this, both ITN and BBC TV news have said nothing at all.

By contrast, readers will doubtless recall the TV images of thousands of refugees fleeing the fighting and bombing in Kosovo in 1999. ITN and the BBC repeatedly showed dramatic

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footage of whole hillsides covered with desperate refugees, accompanied by daily on the spot reports, interviews and investigation. Detailed and emotive coverage of human suffering was available.

Similarly, while we might consider *The Guardian* reports a sign of the paper’s openness and independence, a comparison with its reports in 1999 tells a different story. Since 11 September, *The Guardian* and *The Observer* have mentioned the catastrophe afflicting the 350,000 refugees at Maslakh five times—an average of once per month. By contrast, as of 27 January, the same papers had mentioned the story of prisoners held at a U.S. camp at Guantanamo Bay 72 times that month—a suitably safe issue, compared with our responsibility for the mass death of Afghan refugees.

Also, between April and June 1999, *The Guardian* mentioned the plight of 65,000 Kosovan refugees

stranded at Brace on Macedonia’s border with Kosovo 48 times—or about once every two days. The scale of the suffering then is dwarfed by that of Afghanistan now.

The vital difference is the direction where the finger of blame can be pointed. Although much of the Kosovan human flood was in response to NATO’s (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) air campaign, independent monitors, and even the U.S. State Department, reported that the mass exodus and increased atrocities began after the onset of bombing, and the media chose to accept British and U.S. claims that Serbian ‘genocide’ was to blame. As a result, during the Kosovo crisis, the plight of refugees was used as powerful propaganda justifying NATO’s assault. Politicians repeatedly drew attention to the suffering caused by the Serbs, describing “the kind of ethnic cleansing we thought had disappeared after the Second World War,” as NATO Secretary General, George Robertson, described it.⁹ The media were happy to do likewise. In Afghanistan, by contrast, it is clear that the war against terrorism bears considerable responsibility for the calamity, for the disruption of food supplies, and for the mass suffering and death both inside and outside the Afghan camps. In a report in *Sunday Telegraph*, Christina Lamb wrote of refugees in Maslakh: “Most come from the northern provinces of Faryab, Ghor and Sar-e-Pul, as well as Ghazni in central Afghanistan, mountainous places to which the World Food Programme was giving food aid but stopped because of the bombing. Now their vil-

lages cannot be reached because the passes are cut off."¹⁰

In *The Observer's* latest mention of the refugee situation in Afghanistan, Suzanne Goldenberg writes that Maslakh was already in crisis last summer, but "its population swelled after 11 September when international aid workers were evacuated from Afghanistan."¹¹

This is deeply embarrassing for the U.S. and British governments, for the 'war for civilisation,' and for the establishment media supporting them. Politicians have not drawn attention to the plight of refugees and, again, the media have been happy to follow their lead.

This standard pattern of obedience was repeated with even more dramatic clarity over East Timor. Massacres that happened before, during and after NATO's 'moral crusade' in Kosovo were all but ignored by the press prior to the 30 August 2000 referendum. The subsequent hypocrisy of the West's moral crusaders in failing to respond, or even speak out, as atrocities committed by our Indonesian trading partners continued also went unnoticed. Another example is the media's respectful silence over the mass death of Iraqi civilians, despite the resignation of high-level UN diplomats in 1998 and 2000 who described Western sanctions policy as "genocidal." New Labour's performance on this issue was not considered worth discussing by the media during last year's general election, for example.

The profound moral sickness afflicting our society is also revealed in the passionate intensity and extent of coverage afforded U.S. victims of 11 September, compared with the plight of Afghan victims between 7 October 2001 and the present. In early January, U.S. writer Ed Herman estimated that media coverage afforded to the death of Nathan Chapman, the sole U.S. combat casualty, had exceeded coverage afforded to all Afghan victims of bombing and starvation. Noam Chomsky reports one reference to the Maslakh camp in the entire coverage of the U.S. media. Cable News Network (CNN) Chair Walter Isaacson is reported to have declared that it "seems perverse to focus too much on the casualties or hardship in Afghanistan."¹²

It is an understandable aversion, given that Afghans may well be losing their lives for no good reason at all. Professor Victor Bulmer-Thomas of the Royal Institute of International Affairs argues that increased security, measures against money laundering, and an increase in intelligence-sharing around the world are degrading global terrorism. He also supports an approach that addresses the causes of disaffection in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. "But the bombing," Bulmer-Thomas argues, "has unfortunately given ammunition to many countries around the world, which is exacerbating the problem." His conclusion is a sombre one for the grieving masses of Afghanistan: "If anyone thinks that this temporary degradation of Al-Qaeda's capabilities through the elimination of terrorist training camps in Afghanistan

somehow or other will reduce the risks of terrorist attacks in the future, I'm afraid they're wrong. Because terrorist training camps don't have to be in Afghanistan, they can be anywhere. And indeed the temptation now for Al-Qaeda will be to site the training of its operatives in Western Europe, Canada and even in the U.S."¹³

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Source: *The Ecologist*, <http://www.theecologist.org>, March 2002

Footnote:

¹ Stephen Morris and Felicity Lawrence, "Afghanistan Facing Humanitarian Disaster," *The Guardian*, 19 September 2001.

² Doug McKinlay, "Refugees Left in the Cold at 'Slaughterhouse' Camp," *The Guardian*, 3 January 2002.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Christian Aid Website, "Hunger Forces Families to Abandon Mountain Homes," 4 January 2002.

⁵ "The Dispossessed," BBC2, 20 January 2002.

⁶ "ITN Lunchtime News," 9 January 2002.

⁷ Ravi Nessman, "Afghans Eat Grass as Aid Fails to Arrive," *The Guardian*, 9 January 2002.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Interview with Jonathan Dimbleby, ITV, 11 June 2000.

¹⁰ Christina Lamb, "They Call This Slaughterhouse," *Sunday Telegraph*, 9 December 2001.

¹¹ Suzanne Goldenberg, "Hunger and Vengeance Haunt Afghanistan's Sprawling Tent City," *The Observer*, 27 January 2002.

¹² *Washington Post*, 31 October 2001.

¹³ Interview with Jonathan Dimbleby, ITV, 28 January 2002.