

## MANY DIFFERENT ENEMIES:



**AFGHAN WOMEN FIGHT FOR THEIR COUNTRY**



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percent of the world's opium is cultivated in Afghanistan, and it's a big drug business for the Westerners to control that."

Last week, captured Afghan militants led British forces to a stash of "several tons" of raw opium on one of Ahmed Wali Karzai's farms (United Press International, August 13, 2009). Ahmed, head of the provincial council of Kandahar, is President Hamid Karzai's half-brother. Ahmed, of course, was not arrested. Shazia told us about Ahmed Wali Karzai's drug activities right before this story broke.

Our conversation soon illuminates the America that Afghans know, the one so many here don't want to recognize. Under the Taliban, opium production was banned and the export of opium dropped dramatically. Under Karzai, business is booming. "They encouraged farmers to grow. If Karzai encourages, the U.S. encourages." Shazia also told us about the new Minister of Anti-Narcotics, General Khodaidad, "the biggest, biggest drug lord" in her country.

As we write this, thousands of U.S. Marines and British soldiers are knee-deep in an offensive in the opium-rich Helmand Province, supposedly to tackle this "Taliban stronghold" and fight the poppy industry. The role has seemed to shift lately towards more anti-narcotics operations, supposedly to take away the financial base of terrorists and Taliban militants. But one can't help but wonder whose crops they will be destroying if they are following the lead of an anti-drug policy being written and directed by one of the countries largest drug-dealers. Thousands of villagers, as well as hundreds of U.S., British and Afghan soldiers and many Taliban-affiliated fighters have been killed in the Helmand in the last two months.

Aside from the opium-trade, this "surge" also came at a time when Hamid Karzai feared he would lose this election. Attempts to "weaken the Taliban" could well have been a tactic of scaring people into voting for the current government, or keeping Taliban-supporters scared of going to the polls. This form of political bullying grew even more explicit this week, with Karzai announcing a ban on reports of violence or "opposition" during the voting process, which has been quickly condemned by human rights groups and the UN. Perhaps Karzai took a tip from the Americans here, with Tom Ridge's recent admission that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Attorney General John Ashcroft pushed him to raise terror alert levels during the 2004 elections.

The U.S. and Karzai insist that low-voter turnout is the result of Taliban-led attempts to disrupt the elections, which they did through bombings, an attempted bank robbery and multiple instance of murder. However, it's more likely that low-voter turnout is the result of a general feeling of mistrust amongst the Afghan population. "Like millions of Afghans, I have no hope in the results of this week's election", Malalai Joya said in a recent online post. "In a country ruled by warlords, occupation forces, Taliban insurgency, drug money and guns, no one can expect a legitimate or fair vote."

## **MANY DIFFERENT ENEMIES: AFGHAN WOMEN FIGHT FOR THEIR COUNTRY**

As the government of Afghanistan, under the watchful eye of Washington, prepared for its second national election since the U.S. invasion of 2001, we sat down with Shazia, a Kabul resident and member of the powerful organization RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan. We wanted to ask her about the current situation in her country, and the experiences of women under the regime of Hamid Karzai and his American backers.

From the moment of introduction it became clear that Shazia, a name she uses for protection, is an insightful and determined woman. She takes a daily risk in her activism, aiding her fellow citizens in a country that often has women literally surrounded by threats ranging from warlords, U.S. soldiers and contractors, to religious fundamentalists and drug cartels.

RAWA was formed in 1977 during the initial phases of the Soviet invasion. Their mission is the true liberation of not just Afghan women, but Afghanistan as a whole, and they have maintained this work throughout the nine years of Soviet occupation, the subsequent civil war, and 20+ years of hard-line religious rule. They have suffered serious repression, most notably the 1987 assassination of RAWA founder and leader Mina by KHAN (Afghan KGB) agents.

From the beginning, RAWA has demanded the withdrawal of foreign armies from their country while also challenging oppressive threats within Afghanistan. When the Soviets withdrew in 1989, different factions within the Mujahideen, a loose-coalition of Muslim resistance groups largely based in Pakistan and allied against the Soviets, vied for power. The dominant groups that emerged in the ensuing civil war, due in large part to the disproportionate amount of secret U.S. aid given to these smaller, far-extremist factions during the occupation, were the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. RAWA maintained a general opposition to both of these groups, as their interests were not in support of the freedom of the women of Afghanistan, but in the interests of their own political and business ventures.

The United States joins the Soviet Union, the Northern Alliance, and the Taliban on this list, of unpopular military forces producing hardship for the Afghan people. From 1979 through the 1990's, covert operations (like one involving Osama Bin Laden's Makhtab al Khadimat, which after the war would become Al Qaida) resulted in the Taliban's rise to power. Today, after 8 years, the NATO-led American occupation continues bringing hardship, death, and corruption to their war-torn and desperately poor country.

RAWA's work continues at present through a conjunction of political and social activities including literacy classes for women, educational craft centers, refugee relief aid, orphanages, and medical services. Their political activism ranges from helping organize mass rallies to speaking engagements for small gatherings, often in secret, in an effort to reach out to those most oppressed. Internationally, RAWA's trips to share their experiences and understandings with allies all over the world have helped forge alliances where a media-wall often prevents the development of real knowledge and cooperation.

When the U.S. invaded, "people were hopeful" because people were fed up with the Taliban's harsh rule. But when the U.S. "brought Karzai as their puppet" they "shunned the trust and demands of the Afghan people", Shazia tells us. It quickly became obvious that the White House "relied on and shared power with those fundamentalist extremists who were in power before the Taliban"; with many of their key political and social stances sharing the same ideas.

Afghan MP Malalai Joya, who has survived three assassination attempts and was recently suspended from the Afghan parliament for speaking out publicly against other members of the government, states it directly: "Our country is being run by a mafia, and while it is in power there is no hope for freedom for the people of Afghanistan."

"If democrats take power (in Afghanistan), then there's no need for the U.S. to be in Afghanistan" Shazia added. "That's why they never rely on democrats."

Perhaps the occupation's hypocrisy can be summed up best by the empty, rhetorical responses Western politicians offered in response to the Karzai administration's passing of the Shi'a Personal Status Law. The law, introduced and supported by hard line Shi'a clerics and signed with no public announcement by Hamid Karzai earlier this month, allows Shi'a men to deprive their wives of food and basic necessities if they refuse to fulfill sexual demands. It goes on to require permission from one's husband before applying for work, and effectively legalizes rape by requiring that "blood money" be paid to the victim's family.

Though President Obama called the law "abhorrent", he did nothing in his power to push Karzai to repeal it. France threatened to withdraw only its female troops, but nothing else has been done. Alone, as is so often the case, Afghan women took to the streets in protest, risking their lives to voice their opposition. "The government was not democratically elected, and it is now trying to use the country's Islamic law as a tool with which to limit women's rights", Malalai Joya contends.

"In 2007 more women killed themselves in Afghanistan than ever before", she continued. Shazia told us of a terrifying increase of self-immolations, with hundreds of women setting themselves on fire in the last few years. Malalai, Shazia, and millions of other women in Afghanistan live amongst this nightmare, struggling to make sense of the horrors of war while dealing with their

immediate safety. "We have a lot of different enemies in Afghanistan", Shazia explains.

## THE WAR CONTINUES

While the West grapples to understand a fraction of what is happening in Afghanistan, its citizens are dying. Western media reports censor, mis-construe, or conceal facts, in large part due to the American media often reporting events after they have been carefully processed through a Pentagon filter, part of a Bush "War on Terror" program first developed in 2002 by the Office of Strategic Influence. The Pentagon's efforts to undermine reality continue to this day, with reports on U.S. air raids and predator strikes always assuring us of 'suspected militants' or 'Taliban fighters' being killed, with the gross majority of civilian casualties hidden from view. Take a bombing incident in July, 2002 where after a U.S. plane bombed a wedding killing upwards of 40 civilians, U.S. Central Command released the following response: "Close air support from U.S. Air Force B-52 and AC-130 aircraft struck several ground targets, including anti-aircraft artillery sites that were engaging the aircraft."

Since then, funding for these 'strategic' communications programs has grown at a staggering rate, with the Washington Post last month finding funding for such programs growing from \$9 million in 2005 to nearly \$1 billion dollars for fiscal year 2010. Quite frankly, it is passed the point where the existence of such programs should be considered shocking.

Meanwhile, atrocities continue. Shazia described a U.S. bombing earlier this year in Farah province, where over 150 people were killed. "They massacred more than 150 Afghans. I personally saw the lists of the people who were killed. 12 people were killed from one family. I saw the name of a child of one year, of two years who were killed. This is a massacre. This is a mockery of freedom and democracy in Afghanistan."

After the invasion, the U.S. "almost removed the Taliban in one month", she continues, "then they brought Karzai". Since then, coalition deaths have increased every year except 2003, where they fell from 67 to 57, then back to 59 in 2004. Halfway through 2009, coalition deaths (overwhelmingly American and British) have almost surpassed last year's record of 294, with July being the bloodiest month on record.

All the while, Taliban forces have steadily grown more powerful. "It shows that they don't want to remove them from Afghanistan, because they need a justification to be in Afghanistan, to fulfill their demands and interests in Afghanistan" Shazia says. "Through Afghanistan they can easily control Pakistan, Iran and the Middle East countries." Furthermore, "more than 92

Shazia adds; "I don't think that people will go to vote... Because these elections, these laws that are being passed, are just for show, to show to the world that the U.S. invaded Afghanistan and now Afghan women are free, and now they have democracy and they are living in peace, it's just a show to the world."

Last Thursday's election has since been heralded as a beacon of democracy and freedom, despite low turn out reported in several, but not all, provinces (though hardly any turnout in the Helmand, Kandahar, and Logar provinces), and 26 Afghans dead, four of them children. Karzai sounded very obliged in the Washington Post, "We regret the loss of civilian lives, but we are grateful for the sacrifices people made. It went very, very well."

And though the White House's public justification for the surge and ongoing occupation has received little criticism from its constituents, Shazia, along with a large portion of her country and an increasing number of U.S. service-members, does not agree with the common American rhetoric that troops need to stay to prevent a civil war. "Now there is a civil war", she says. "If the troops leave Afghanistan, of course for a few years there will be wars... Years and years of struggle is needed. After World War Two, the European and Western countries all struggled. Women and men, they, together, struggled to better their own countries. We will also do that. We will give sacrifices. But we will do that ourselves. Because history has shown that no country can grant peace and security to another country as a gift. This is the responsibility of that country, that people, to gain those values.... by their resistance and by their struggle."

*By Ryan Harvey and Sergio España, CSA, August 25th, 2009*