



US soldier arrogantly searches a young girl, with utter disregard for the sensibilities of the people.

The US imperialists invaded Afghanistan in the autumn of 2001 as the first chapter in their "war on terrorism". A series of articles in *AWTW* 28/2002 exposed the true intentions behind the US-British aggression against Afghanistan and the hypocrisy of their public opinion campaign about women's oppression, the "democratic" regime change and Islamic fundamentalism. Since October 2002, British and US planes pounded over 10,000 tonnes of bombs on the heads of the Afghanistani people, murdering several thousand civilians. Most of these people died in air strikes. Nearly twice as many soldiers were killed, either on the battlefield or as prisoners of war in transit. An estimated 3,000 of the 8,000 prisoners who were sealed in metal containers en route to Sheberghan prison died from asphyxiation or shots fired into the containers; another 500 to 800 prisoners were slaughtered at Mazar-i-Sharif, most by US warplanes - one of US Defence Secretary Rumsfeld's "proudest moments". Countless villages and thousands of homes were destroyed. According to the British daily, the *Guardian*, nearly a quarter of a million Afghanistanis fled to Iran

and Pakistan after 11 September, an unknown number of whom died on the way. Another 200,000 people fled the bombing of their home areas but remained in Afghanistan. The US refuses to publish an accurate report of the vengeful devastation they have wrought against the people there.

By sowing fear and terror amongst the population, the US aimed to secure the rule of its puppet regime

over the people and establish the basis for medium to long-term occupation in the country and region. Mention of al-Qaeda has practically disappeared from the imperialists' political discourse, reflecting once again that countering the Taliban's armed Islamic regime with more sophisticated state-sponsored Western terror was always more motivated by gaining a more secure foothold in the



In mid-November, police opened fire and killed four Afghanistani students at Kabul University trying to break a blockade by riot police during a protest over the food shortages since the US invasion.

area than any other of its promises. The US has long had the desire to increase its influence over central Asia and gain control of its vast oil and natural gas reserves, as well as carving out a path for that oil to the world market mainly through a stable Afghanistan.

But political stability in Afghanistan is not likely to be achieved through greater force; the repeated terroristic operations of the US and allied forces only succeeded in turning more and more people against them. The US bombing of a wedding party in July 2002 resulted in the massacre of at least 120 people, provoking widespread anger throughout the country. The hatred of the Taliban's primitive and despotic fundamentalism has turned into a hatred of the US occupation. And in addition to living under another foreign occupation, which Afghanistan's history is littered with, the latest Made-in-Washington solution hasn't changed the daily misery and semi-feudal oppression that make life hell for the population as a whole and women in particular. In some ways it has reinforced it.

THE LOYA JIRGA REINFORCES A FUNDAMENTALIST REGIME

The reality is that the Taliban's extreme fundamentalist regime has been replaced by a different fundamentalist one. The "new" political power represents a compromise between various Islamic forces (*jihadi*) that fought the Russians and, following their withdrawal in the early 1990s, established the Islamic state of Afghanistan, imposing the oppressive set of Islamic rules known as *sharia* as the law of the country. Now these same political forces are an important component of the new regime. Mr Karzai, the favourite of the West whom the US chose as head of the government, is no better: not only did he work with the Islamic state before the Taliban, he was involved in the Taliban's rise to power, providing them with both Western money and arms - they considered him for the post of international spokesman.

Karzai lived in the United States for several years and served as an advisor to the Unocal oil company.

After the emergency *loya jirga* in June 2002 (a feudal council of chiefs from different regions) the composition of political power shifted slightly, but in the direction of strengthening rather than weakening fundamentalism. Before the *loya jirga* a circle of people close to Zahir Shah (king of Afghanistan before the 1973 coup) had been included in the new government who would have acted more as technocrats, representing the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, and would not have been such hard-line fundamentalists. In the power struggle on the eve of and throughout the *loya jirga*, these forces closer to Zahir Shah were eliminated or weakened. Although originally Zahir Shah was considered as a candidate for head of state, he was instead excluded altogether. Then a campaign against secularism and against even limited freedom for women was launched by powerful figures in the government. The minister for women's affairs in the interim government, Sima Samar, was also removed from the new cabinet following the *loya jirga*. After she hinted that she did not support *sharia*, a campaign was immediately conducted against her to force her to apologise for her comments.

The US imperialists' heavy shadow hung over the *loya jirga*. Zalmy Khalilzad, George Bush's advisor on Afghanistan, was active behind the scenes. The powerful commanders so hated by the masses sat in the front row of the assembly, with the backbenches packed with their reactionary supporters. The US imperialists sought a broad alliance with the feudal landlord class, which find their political expression in the fundamentalist warlords, in order to further develop them as bureaucrat capitalists. The US's approval of a new religious dictatorship is done with full awareness that fundamentalism aggressively enforces the most backward traditions of the society, which in turn strengthens the semi-colonial, semi-feudal relations.

Sixty per cent of the population are women, but their participation in the

loya jirga was only symbolic: a group of 15 women (or 1% of the representatives) were carefully selected and approved by the authorities. There are reports that some participants were threatened and sexually abused during the *loya jirga* itself.

ISLAMIC LAW STIFLES WOMEN

Formally women now have the "right" to wear a *chador* (allowing their faces to be seen) instead of the suffocating *burka* that makes them invisible. However, in Kabul almost all young women still wear the *burka*, mainly out of fear. When the fundamentalists in the new government first came to power back in the early 1990s, they expelled women from their government jobs and from the political life of the country as a whole, imposing many of the intolerable norms of tradition, such as arranged marriages. They also made the *hijab* (Islamic covering) compulsory, threatened women who were working and separated the education of boys and girls. In 1994, the Supreme Court of the Islamic State of Afghanistan issued an "Ordinance on Women's Veils" which demanded that women be fully covered by the *burka* anywhere outside their homes. The Northern Alliance forces carried out systematic gang-rape of women of other nationalities and are deeply hated and feared for that reason.

Today, women are allowed to work if there is a job possibility for them, if they dare to withstand the threats and the consequences. However, only a small number of women in the large cities, with skills needed in hospitals or schools, are able to find work. For the majority of women nothing has changed, or their prospects are even bleaker. One woman stated in front of a Kabul office, "for four months I have been coming here every day to beg for work ... My children are starving and nobody here will do anything for me", is typical of the situation of many women in Afghanistan, and in the countryside it is worse.

Where they are able to, girls are returning to school with great

enthusiasm, but in many areas they face threats of being set on fire. Several girls' schools have been bombed in the past few months.

The government not only does not take steps to restrict such actions but, through various anti-women measures, encourages them. Within a few days of taking power the new government issued the decree of *hijab* for women in the workplace. Today, even the Western papers cannot hide the reality of how the new government is perpetuating the formal oppression of women institutionalised by the Islamic state. In many ways, they are even continuing the work of the Taliban itself. The US magazine *Newsweek* recounted the story of how a prisoner, who was falsely accused of adultery under Taliban rule on the sole basis of her former husband's testimony, is being prosecuted and jailed by the new government. In the state of Herat women are forbidden to join their families who walk in the city parks in the evening for relief from the heat and they are not allowed to wear colourful clothes in public.

While the US deceitfully proclaimed they would liberate women, what they have achieved by putting their own puppets in power does not come close to even a bourgeois-democratic concept of gender equality. The irony is that the situation (of urban women) is more backward than in the 1980s and before, at which time 40 per cent of doctors and 50 per cent of university students in Kabul were women.

STABILITY, SECURITY AND PROSPERITY FOR WHOM?

One of the imperialists' main aims in Afghanistan has been "stability", but as they defined it, which meant stability in order to make Afghanistan a safe place for their strategic plans for the region and a safe route for the oil and natural gas pipeline from central Asia. One year after the US declared victory in Afghanistan, the situation is anything but stable. The puppet government and security forces have no control outside Kabul, which itself can hardly be considered

"secure". For example, Karzai depends fully on US soldiers for his own personal protection. Some figures within imperialist circles argue that a full-scale invasion and occupation is necessary in order to take complete control into their own hands, instead of leaving it to a puppet regime.

The unreliability of the regional commanders and chiefs is also linked to their historical role in defending one or another colonial invader in the "great games" the big powers have been waging amongst themselves for nearly two centuries over the strategically important Afghanistan. Clearly one source of instability and a reason that pure US military might has not prevailed, as the US announced it would, is that today the various reactionary forces in Afghanistan and within the government have the particular feature of having changed political allegiance many times in the past two decades. But the reality is that the present situation of extreme insecurity and poverty for the masses has been developed by the rivalry of the big powers over gaining influence over central Asia and not by the warlords or smaller neighbouring countries, which have merely served as pawns in the imperialist contention. The *Guardian* recounts that within two weeks of 11 September CIA paramilitary troops were parachuted in to deliver suitcases bulging with money to local warlords in order to buy their co-operation, in one instance as much as \$3 million.

Although there has been much talk about reconstruction in Afghanistan, for the imperialists this primarily means how to shape the country in order to dominate it more. The large amounts of reconstruction aid promised by Western states must be seen within their overall goal of tying Afghanistan more closely into the world market, which will place it in a more favourable position for the imperialists to extract profitable returns in the long run. In the meantime, their aim is to fuse and build up a small class of loyal political rulers to develop some degree of stability. However, mostly this political solution leaves out the

masses, as the intense poverty and desperation of people's lives show.

Reconstruction has little to do with improving the living standard of the masses of Afghanistan. In Tokyo the imperialists promised \$5.2 billion over 5 years, but only half of the \$1.8bn for the first year has actually been delivered. Even if part of these donations are spent on building roads or purchasing aircraft, communications and other modern equipment, their objective is to facilitate military transport and capital flow. Military operations alone are estimated to have cost above \$10bn in the past year. Much of the aid is allocated to building an army, trained by several Western countries. A British investigative reporter describes the intense local resentment towards the more than one thousand UN agencies and non-governmental organisations clogging up the one-third of Kabul that was left standing, driving rents sky high and squandering huge amounts of aid money on bloated salaries and fleets of Land Cruisers.

Since the US invasion the economic situation for the masses, especially the poor, has worsened, with no prospects of work or other sources of income. According to the World Food Programme, more than half of Afghanistani families need emergency food supplies. Some poor peasants had no choice but to return to opium production. Many people who have not lost their life have lost everything they owned in US air raids. There is increasing pressure on existing shelter, forcing the poor out of low-rental housing. A common remark to journalists is that, "At first, when the Americans came, I was happy. I thought, 'our lives will get better'. But there is nothing for us."

The disastrous living conditions and devastation caused by the savage imperialist war to install the new puppet regime over the past year, which have shattered the lives of so many Afghanistani people, are only a foretaste of what lies in store for the Iraqi people once the US fully unleashes its dogs of war in the next round of its empire-building crusade. ■