

Victims of September 11

The remembrance was made graphic by the reading of 2,823 names, one by one. These were the victims of September 11 attack on the World Trade Centre. Rudolph Giuliani, the former mayor of New York, began the tribute at a day of observance, marked by a minute's silence and a bagpipe procession to ground zero.

Thousands of miles away, in the bombed desert village of Hajibirgit, there was no ceremony, no reading of names, just an eerie silence. At dawn, a young man walked to a small grave, just as he has done this ever since that terrible night of May 22, 2002 when Haji Birgit Khan, the 85-year-old village leader was seen running from his little lawn towards the white-walled village mosque. He had barely set foot inside the mosque when a burst of gunfire was heard. Haji Baba, as Birgit Khan was lovingly called, fell on the floor of the mosque. Several men from the Special American Forces rushed toward him. But before their arrival, Haji Baba had gone beyond their reach. The men from the Special Force took his body with them.

The Americans had arrived in this remote village by helicopters, accompanied by local Afghan soldiers. They tied up the women and lifted their *burqas* to look at their faces to confirm their identities. Three-year-old Zarguna, the daughter of Abdul Shakour, became so frightened that she ran from her house and toppled into the village's 60 foot deep well on the other side of the mosque. During that terrible night, she was to drown there, alone. Her body was found the next day.

On September 11, 2002, no one read out Zarguna's name. She was ignored just as she was ignored on that terrible night of May 22, 2002 when President Bush's "War of Terror" reached her village. The Special Forces men and women were not interested in such details as the life of an innocent child. These 150 soldiers from the US 101st Airborne, whose home base is at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, were in hot pursuit of al-Qaeda men, or so they claimed.

But the victims of the Hajibirgit village, 50 miles into the desert from Kandahar, were not just the 85-year old Haji Birgit or the three-year old Zarguna. On that night of terror, all the women and children were ordered to gather at one end of Hajibirgit. Men were forced to lie down and were handcuffed. Then they were blindfolded and pushed toward helicopters and taken to Kandahar where they were herded together into a container. Their legs were tied and then their handcuffs and the manacle of one leg of each prisoner were separately attached to stakes driven into the floor of the container.



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Thick sacks were put over their heads. Then their clothes were torn and beards were shaved. While they stood naked, they were questioned by Americans through Afghan interpreters. None was found guilty of any association with al-Qaeda.

They were later released. It was yet another mistake, the world was told; the US army had bombed another village "by mistake". When the men returned to their village, they found that it had been plundered by a group of men from Helmand province, under the command of Abdul Rahman Khan, a Karzai government police commander. After the Americans left, all but 10 of the 105 families had fled into the hills, leaving their mud homes to be pillaged.

After the plunder was over, men of the village came back to find a single bullet hole in the concrete floor of the mosque and the dried bloodstain beside it. They also found bits of Haji Baba's brain on the wall. These victims of President Bush's War are not the only ones not remembered on September 11, 2002. There are twenty thousand more civilians who have paid with their lives, property or both.

Another American gift for the people of Afghanistan that should also be remembered along with the victims of September 11: thousands of cluster bombs, 20 per cent of whose "bomblets" have buried themselves in the ground, turning themselves into mines. These bomblets have killed and maimed thousands of Afghans and they continue to do so. One only has to pay a visit to the Mirwais hospital in Kandahar to see the crippled men, women and children sitting in long queues for artificial legs. No remembrance for them either.

"In Afghanistan, it is possible to go from hell to hell," Robert Fisk recently wrote after a visit to a refugee camp near the Pakistan border. "The first circle of hell is the Waiting Area, the faeces-encrusted dustbowl in which 60,000 Afghans rot along their frontier with Pakistan at Chaman." This graphic description of the lives of thousands of Afghans is a chilling reminder to the world that victims of September 11 do not only lay buried at ground zero. They also exist in the "bone-dry, sand-blasted patched tents" along with their "skinny camels, infested blankets and skin diseases". These "laughing children with terrible facial sores, old women of 30, white-bearded, dark-turbaned men" who sit in their "huts of dry twigs" do not even have

the words to ask us: "What was our fault? Why were we attacked?"

There are no ceremonies to be held, no candles to be lit for these silent victims of September 11. They have no way of asking any questions.

They sit silently, day after day, and wait for the next turn of events. They are completely at the mercy of others. But those who can still raise voices include six million Muslims living in the United States. Between September and December 2001, at least 1,200 were rounded up by various agencies in the United States. These raids were conducted with wartime urgency and uncommon secrecy. Although most of the detainees have since been released or deported, some 200 are still being held, without charges, without trials.

Since September 11, 2001, Muslims in North America have lost all sense of security; they are no longer equal citizens. They are anxious and increasingly angry at what is happening to their lives, careers and businesses. At airports, they are "randomly selected" for extra-search, and at public places, they are seen as potential danger. They have been called in for interviews by police. There is a widespread perception that few non-Muslim Americans understand — or care — what they're going through.

Particularly chilling and telling are the comments (made on July 19, 2002 by a member of the US Commission on Civil Rights and since then rejected by the full panel) that raised the spectre of internment camps for American Muslims if there was another attack on US soil. These comments by a Bush appointee to the US Commission on Civil Rights only inflamed the situation. At the hearing, held in downtown Detroit, Commissioner Peter Kirsanow said that "if there's another terrorist attack and if it's from a certain ethnic community or certain ethnicities that the terrorists are from, you can forget about civil rights in this country."

A Cleveland lawyer, Kirsanow later added that another attack could lead to internment camps such as those built to hold Japanese Americans in World War II. "Not too many people will be crying in their beer if there are more detentions, more stops, more profiling. There will be a groundswell of public opinion to banish civil rights," Kirsanow said.

The events of September 11 have produced one of the worst responses by a country that sees itself as the only superpower on earth. True, America was attacked, but the response to this attack has been an immoral and unjust war against Islam and Muslims that continues to enlarge its sphere. How many more victims would this war claim? Where would it lead us?