**[Post-war punishment](https://www.dawn.com/news/1662538/post-war-punishment)**

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LAST week, a bunch of nations that contributed to the 20-year occupation of Afghanistan jointly issued a statement expressing their indignation over “reports of summary killings and enforced disappearances of former members of the Afghan security forces as documented by Human Rights Watch and others”, and calling on the Taliban to desist from “serious human rights abuses [that] contradict” their “announced amnesty”.

Their outrage relates to a report about the fate of 47 individuals. So, how have the same countries responded to equally credible reports from international agencies predicting that up to a million Afghan children could perish this winter from malnutrition and related maladies?

With a deafening silence.

It could actually be worse. The UN’s World Food Programme and Food and Agriculture Organisation have said that 22.8m Afghans, more than half the nation’s population, potentially face life-threatening levels of “food insecurity”. Possible death by starvation, in other words. And 8.7m of those could be confronted by a famine.

A fraction of the cost of war could save Afghan lives.

Are Afghanistan’s former Western “saviours” rushing food and medical supplies into the country? Far from it. The foreign aid on which Afghanistan largely depended during the Western occupation was suspended as soon as the US ceded power to the Taliban. The nation’s foreign assets were frozen.

Global financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank are beholden to the US and the question of defying its diktat simply does not arise. There has occasionally been talk of relatively minor exemptions for “humanitarian” assistance, but foreign banks remain wary of falling foul of American sanctions, given the US attitude towards those dealing with, for instance, Cuba or Iran.

More than 50 years ago, after Chileans elected a government of which Washington did not approve, the Nixon-Kissinger clique resolved to make the South American nation’s economy “scream”. The tactic worked — and led to the atrocious Pinochet dictatorship. Since that “success”, there have been multiple efforts to squeeze the economies of nations that dare to defy Washington.

Cuba was targeted long before Chile, whereas Iran is a relatively recent adversary. Leaving aside the particularities of those states, what exactly do the US and its allies hope to achieve by starving Afghanistan? Are they guided merely by the obsession with obfuscating a damning geopolitical failure?

Much of the Western mainstream media has been itching to find evidence that its dire prognostications of post-occupation doom are being fulfilled. Thus far, the Taliban have refused to come to the party. A total of 47 deaths or disappearances, and a few dozen more potentially similar cases, do not exactly add up to the predicted mass reprisals against all perceived collaborators. Many of the latter understandably live in fear, and there could be worse to come. But so far, it hasn’t.

Fears about the future of women under the Taliban are far from baseless. Women have substantially, albeit not completely, disappeared from TV screens. Most have not been able to return to their government or other jobs, either by diktat or out of fear. Girls’ education has resumed only in some parts of the country, and even there it’s largely restricted to primary schools.

At the same time, at least in Kabul, as Andrew Quilty reported in Rolling Stone, despite “a noticeable shift toward the traditional, women still walk the streets without male guardians, bereft of the all-covering burqa, while men continue to shave and wear western-style clothes. Female university students deliberately walk by groups of Taliban with their faces uncovered, an attempted provocation the Talibs barely register.”

Of course, what happens in Kabul does not necessarily translate to Nangarhar or Kandahar. Still, it’s a refreshing change from the more obscurantist tendencies of the previous Taliban regime. Last week’s ban on forced marriages, decreeing that “no one can force women to marry by coercion or pressure”, also looks like a step away from the relentless illiberalism of yore. If it is enforced.

That’s a big if. The marginally less offensive facade of the Taliban may well turn out to be a temporary ploy. But, more broadly, it would be unconscionable to lump them with exclusive responsibility for Afghanistan’s economic plight. The New York Times cites the UN as saying that 30 per cent “more Afghans faced crisis-level food shortages in September and October compared with the same period last year” — a reminder that that such shortages are not exactly a post-occupation novelty.

Afghanistan under the Taliban has thus far avoided the worst predictions, yet the determination to punish the nation for resisting a disastrous occupation remains strong. Its neighbours should no doubt do what they can to alleviate Afghanistan’s distress. But a fraction of what its former occupiers spent on the war could today potentially save millions of lives. Have they no shame whatsoever?

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