**What Afghanistan needs**

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I have a beloved 4-year-old granddaughter. If I lived in Afghanistan, my family would be facing the likelihood that she would die. My heart breaks in pieces thinking of this. The UN estimated a million children under the age of five in Afghanistan will die this winter from malnutrition and starvation, a situation brought on primarily by the US, through economic sanctions and the freezing of Afghan assets in US banks. How did we get to this point?

During the American war in Afghanistan, outside donors (including the US) came to dominate the government, providing the majority of its funds – almost 80 percent – used to pay teachers, health care workers, civil servants, and the many others who made the country run. With the US and Nato departure from Afghanistan in August, this money completely dried up, as did access to the international banking system.

The economy went into free-fall, the government could not pay workers, banks closed, and people had no money to buy food or fuel for the harsh winter. NPR reports that families are selling their children in order to obtain money to buy food to prevent the rest of the family starving to death.

The US spent roughly $2.3 trillion on the Afghanistan war, much of which went to contractors who made enormous profits. While 2,324 American military members died in the war, Afghans suffered far more. Brown University’s Cost of War project found that 69,095 soldiers and national police and an estimated 46,319 civilians were killed; thus, over 115,000 Afghans died as a result of the war. But for the people of Afghanistan, the war has not ended, nor has the killing. The new economic war is expected to kill more Afghans in four months this winter than did the ‘kinetic’ war in twenty years. No one expects the leaders of the Taliban to suffer. But everyone agrees that hundreds of thousands of babies will die. In fact, Afghanistan in 2022 is shaping up to be one of the worst, possibly the worst, humanitarian catastrophe on record, for any country. This tragedy is the result of US policies.

The role of the US in Afghanistan’s latest calamity began, of course, in 2001, when the US waged a war of revenge on a poverty-stricken country that did not attack the US.

That war dragged on, more or less out of sight, after the Iraq war began in 2002. US corruption and ineptitude is devastatingly described in The Afghanistan Papers by Craig Whitlock. While massive amounts of money were spent on the war, Whitlock shows most of it was siphoned off to various war profiteers, lining their pockets and ripping off American taxpayers.

The vast amount of money the US spent had almost nothing to do with helping the Afghan people, although bringing democracy and helping women soon became the raison d’etre for the war, though the actual actions of the US did neither.

Clearly, the Taliban are vicious misogynists and extremely brutal to those who transgress acceptable standards of behavior according to the Taliban’s beliefs. However, essentially all of the Afghan government’s assets remain in US banks (or in banks that are beholden to the US government). The US has frozen these accounts, some $9.4 billion. The result is a ‘liquidity crisis,’ with very little money circulating throughout Afghanistan. The government has almost no money and cannot pay workers, who cannot buy food for their families.

Most have received no payment for months. In addition, Afghans have limited access to their own funds in banks. International commerce has halted. Given US sanctions and the liquidity crisis, even international humanitarian relief organizations have great difficulty operating

in Afghanistan, despite US government assurances.

Relief efforts designed to stave off starvation – although critically important right now – cannot endure for long since no one is willing to provide assistance indefinitely to a country of almost 40 million people. The country needs a functioning government and economy, and needs access to the international financial system.

Unfreezing the assets of the Afghan people and making the funds available to the Afghan Central Bank is a critical first step. The US could conditionally unfreeze the assets (for example, dependent on the ability of girls to attend high school) and in tranches, not all at once, to ensure that the money is used for the people.

But to date, the US has not taken any such steps. The Biden Administration has set aside $780 million for humanitarian relief, a nice gesture but a drop in the bucket compared to what is needed. Put in perspective, the US spent $300 million per day on the war for 20 years, so $780 million of humanitarian assistance represents less than three days’ worth of war spending.

Excerpted: ‘What we Must Do for Afghanistan’.

Courtesy: Counterpunch.org