

A remembrance ceremony

On December 10 many of us received an invitation from the US ambassador to attend, "A remembrance ceremony" on December 11. An explanatory note attached to the invitation read "the ceremony is one of many being held around the world simultaneously on December 11 at the exact hour of the three month anniversary of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in which thousands of people of many nations and religions lost their lives." Unable to attend the memorial we read the *fateha* for all those who had been killed in those terrorist attacks. Also said a prayer for the suffering thousands who must live with the agonizing memory of lost mothers, fathers, siblings, children and friends. Those chilling scenes of the planes flying into the trade centre, of people jumping for life and meeting death as they fell from the fiftieth floor, of ash-laden passer-bys choking to death, came back to haunt again. As they will the collective memory of millions across the world.

The pain and the shock that flowed from September 11 were unifying; as pain always is. But that unity was short-lived. It almost disappeared as the US planes began their first sorties over the Afghan skies on October 7. So maybe through the unusual quarterly, as opposed to the usual annual Remembrance Ceremony, the US administration had hoped to re-unite global opinion. Transnational public opinion united against terrorism would be an asset for the US as it presses ahead with its war on terrorism. But can "Remembrance Ceremonies" help re-create a united opinion against terrorism? No. In fact such ceremonies will largely be interpreted as the luxury of the rich, of the powerful. Holding of these ceremonies will be seen as a function of power, not of sensitivity or of a shared pain. It will be interpreted as an attempt, by those who themselves are responsible for spreading pain, to dominate the act of and the discourse on mourning.

Such a cynical interpretation of a mourning ceremony can be offensive. Yet not necessarily invalid. If the US were genuinely sensitive to pain, opposed to terrorism, committed to acting in accordance with international law, how could it wage war against a war-ravaged country instead of adopting the legal path to nabbing Osama Bin Ladin, how could it continue to pound a country and its people with lethal bombs like the daisy-cutter which are only second to nuclear bombs in their destructive capability, how could it seek "killing rather than safe passage" for the surrendered Taliban, how could it scuttle any bloodless settlement among battling Afghan factions for a gruesome killing of hundreds of Taliban prisoners in the *Qala-i-Jhangi*.

The nightmare of *Qala-i-Jhangi* is fairly well-documented. The latest account has been provided by John Walker Lindh, a convert to Islam, who joined the Taliban in year 2000. Now in US custody Lindh, narrated his experience to a Newsweek journalist. Having fought alongside the Taliban during the two-week siege of Kunduz he surrendered. NA forces sent him and around 500 other passengers to *Qala-i-Jhangi*. His nightmare account, "The NA shut us up in the basement during the night...In the morning we were taken out one by one with our hands tied. All of us were panic-stricken for we thought that we were going to be murdered. I saw two Americans filming and tak-



Nasim Zehra

The writer is an Islamabad-based commentator on security issues
nasimzehra@hotmail.com

ing photographs. I don't know what really happened after we had all been brought out but when I heard a shot I threw myself on the ground. I had been hot in the leg. Then they bombarded us with everything they had. It was horrible. Everyone was wounded. In order to force out the rebel prisoners, the Northern Alliance spilled fuel inside the basement and put it on fire amid a shower of grenades and shells... After three days the basement was flooded with water. We passed the night in ice-cold water. Only those of us survived who were able to stand up all through the night."

Lindh's account is the first published account giving a Taliban prisoner's version. Lindh's account reinforces the compelling accounts of British dailies like The Guardian, the Independent, The Observer documenting deliberate atrocities committed by the US forces and by the NA. In complete contravention of the Geneva Convention on the treatment of War Prisoners the surrendered and captured Taliban were ill-treated and then murdered.

The mode of killing of these hand and feet-cuffed prisoners combined setting them on fire, pounding them with bombs, flooding their prison cells with ice cold water. As widely reported there was active participation of the US airforce and of the CIA in the murder of these Taliban. The US government is culpable of criminal behaviour towards surrendered prisoners.

If the US government is indeed committed to upholding human rights it should have made arrangements for bloodless surrender of Taliban. Unfortunately, the US adopted a mercenary attitude on the issue. The Taliban had formally requested the UN to oversee the unconditional surrender of their forces besieged inside the northern Afghan city of Kunduz. Reportedly, Lakhdar Brahimi, the top UN envoy for Afghanistan said the UN had no presence on the ground, "and simply cannot unfortunately accede to this request". The Taliban then opted for the next available avenue for a bloodless settlement, a direct dialogue between adversaries. A dialogue was initiated in the Kunduz and Kandahar areas. But the US let its opposition to such a dialogue be known. None other than the US Secretary of War Donald Rumsfeld said he would prefer the fighters to be killed, rather than to be allowed to escape alive from Afghanistan. Rumsfeld's statement prompted US-based lawyers and human rights groups to warn their administration that under international law the US could be held responsible for genocide if Taliban troops are massacred despite offering to surrender. The US administration, law unto itself ignored the warning. Rumsfeld has been consistently honest about his ultimate objective. Not a military and political defeat of the Taliban; their death or capture. In fact death, since capture in most cases has led to their death.

Hundreds if not thousands of Taliban have been butchered following their surrender or defeat. In addition to the *Qala-i-Jhangi* reports keep pouring out on how the Taliban prisoners and supporters have been treated. Hundreds reportedly have been

massacred in and around Kandahar. According to the French news agency, AFP, there are around thousand bodies lying around in Kandahar. Many dozens have died of suffocation while being transported in sealed shipping containers on a three-day journey from Kunduz to Shibbergan. The survivors from this harrowing experience talk of prisoners taking turns at breathing through a hole in the container's metal wall. Newspaper photographs show Taliban men captured in cages with iron bars. They are like bewildered men. They are at a loss in their interaction with men, machine and technology, as if from another world. For whatever their mistakes, mostly tutored also by those who now seek their destruction, they are men who deserve justice.

The conduct of the US operation in Afghanistan is questionable on many scores. That is if international law remains the yardstick for measuring the correctness of state behaviour. Without conclusive evidence against Osama, US initiated armed violence against Afghanistan constitutes armed aggression. The UN Security Council resolutions reflect the power equation in international politics. They are not premised on law or on the principle of justice. This aggression, almost unprecedented, has involved the use of the state-of-the-art lethal weaponry. It has created humanitarian and environmental crisis. Strangely no environmental group is raising its voice against the irreparable damage and destruction US bombing is causing to Afghanistan's environment and to the health of the present and future generations of Afghans.

The US administration opposed to responding to the September 11 act of terrorism through of international and domestic law enforcement declared the attack as "an act of war against the US." This enabled George Bush to ignore Conventions like the Montreal Sabotage Convention, which treats the destruction of a civilian aircraft as a criminal act. The Convention has an entire legal regime to deal with this crime. Similarly the Terrorist Bombing Convention too was ignored. According to Professor Francis, "Indeed, there are a good 12-13 treaties out there that deal with various components and aspects of what people generally call international terrorism, that could have been used and relied upon by the Bush administration to deal with this issue." Instead the US administration "abandoned the entire framework of international treaties and agreements that had been established for 25 years to deal with these types of problems and basically go to war." The decision to go to war against the Taliban predated the September 11 terrorist act. That merely provide the much needed rationale to launch a military attack on the Taliban. The September 11 attack also enabled the US to move swiftly on concluding an agreement with the Uzbek government for establishing a military base in Uzbekistan.

The arrogance of power experiences and broadcasts pain selectively. If the victims of September 11 need to be mourned then the thousands of Afghan men, women, children maimed, mutilated and butchered after the US military attack on Afghanistan also deserve a remembrance ceremony. And what does the US deserve for immorally ramming its agenda of ending terrorism through oxygen sucking and grenade blasting cluster bombs and daisy cutters?