



Invasion in the Name of Humanitarian Aid: The US in Afghanistan

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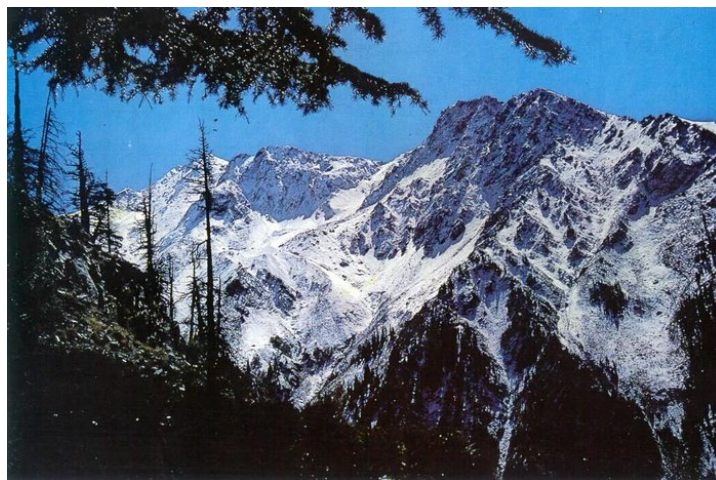
Translation by Zeljko Cipris

It has been seven years since the US military launched air strikes in revenge for the 9/11 terror attacks. The Taliban have not been suppressed and Afghanistan remains in a state of war. Although overshadowed by the war against Iraq, this too is a war of aggression. A Japanese photo journalist examines the US-Afghan War.

The azure skies peculiar to Afghanistan weigh heavily on the land. Rivers that are supposed to flow among the mountains have dried up, exposing the earth's cracked skin. Snow remains here and there, but it is still too early in the season for it to moisten the soil. Magnificent mountains extend in all directions.

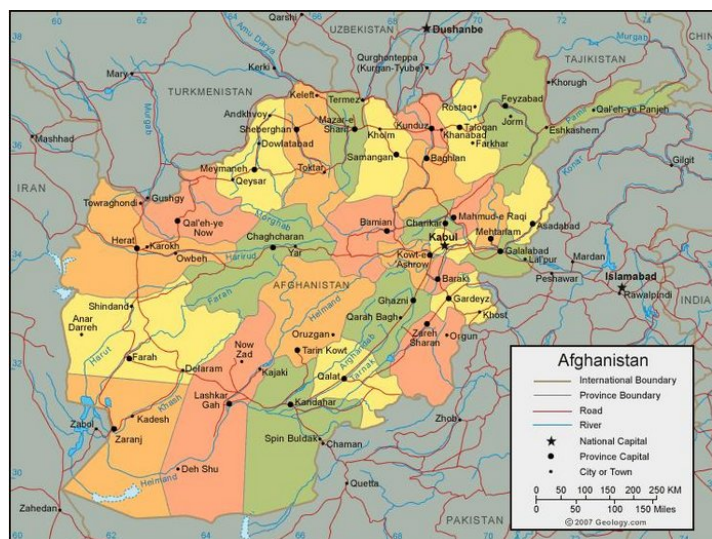
Infantry Company "Alpha"

I reached the Spira district among these mountains on a "Chinook," US army's giant transport helicopter.



Afghanistan's mountains

I covered the front as a US armed forces war correspondent, accompanying the army's 1-503 Rifle Infantry Company "Alpha" which is deployed in Spira, in Afghanistan's eastern Khost province.



Map of Afghanistan

Spira is adjacent to the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The border region, known as a tribal area, is not governed by the laws of either country. Since the 2001 US invasion, the ousted Taliban have been attacking foreign troops and the Afghan army, while basing themselves in this tribal area.

"Alpha's" mission is to carry out humanitarian aid, as well as to interdict and suppress the Taliban who come across the border. Their stated objective is the provision of medical aid to the population who live in the vicinity of the front-line base. Along with a combat unit numbering about a hundred, there is a

humanitarian aid unit of six. Among the latter there are women physicians and even veterinarians.

I left the base with the humanitarian aid unit who said they were going to visit nearby houses. A protection unit accompanied us.

Though they call themselves doctors and vets, they look no different than combatants. They wear bulletproof vests and sunglasses. M16 rifles hang from their necks. Physicians who are supposed to be saving lives are carrying rifles. It is a strange spectacle.

"There's a woman. Don't come in."

As they approach a house, a man of about forty, presumably its owner, is standing in the doorway. The eyes with which he looks at the US troops are extremely frightened.

"Please don't come into the house. There's a woman inside. Please stop." The man firmly refuses the US army's medical assistance.

The commanding officer persuades the man to yield, promising that only female soldiers will enter.

The female soldiers enter the house. The protection unit soldiers follow directly after them. This is not what was promised.

As I enter the premises, I see protection unit soldiers on the roof.

I tense up. Nearly all the people who live in the border region support the Taliban. The Taliban often use private houses as a base. If any Taliban are discovered, there might be a firefight.

Fortunately, the protection unit emerges from the house having found no one who looks like a combatant.

Medical treatment has been given, but it is a formality. The man, whose skin is dry, has been given cream.

"Sometimes we even bring an Afghan doctor from a hospital. The medicine's free too. We show them that we can do what even the Taliban can't." The aid unit's commanding officer looks triumphant.

As we leave the house, we see that soldiers from the protection unit have lined up the males of the house against a wall.

A soldier is holding what looks like a camera against a man's face. The man's eye is reflected in the apparatus lens.

"I'm taking a photo of his retina and data-basing it."

I ask him what for, but the soldier says nothing more. According to what a British journalist familiar with army activities tells me later, it is so that when a Taliban fighter is captured they can check the data base and find out what village he is from. Evidently the data can also be useful for targeting air strikes.

"Humanitarian Aid" as an Instrument

I asked "Alpha's" commanding officer about the aid project.

"Finding the Taliban is extremely difficult. They blend in with the local population. However, if we can turn the local people into our allies through the aid we give them, they are likely to report them to us. This is one of our ultimate objectives."

No longer relying exclusively on military attacks, the US army is changing its strategy and attempting to win the people over through humanitarian aid.

Yet recalling that man's frightened eyes, I cannot think that the strategy is succeeding. Many Afghans regard the United States as an aggressor. Their distrust of Americans cannot be wiped away so simply.

The commanding officer also says that the aid will serve to build a better Afghanistan. However, this is a vision of Afghanistan's future projected by the United States, a vision whose support by the Afghans is rather doubtful.

I cannot help thinking that for the US army, the beautiful words "humanitarian aid" have become an instrument of aggression.

Ignorance Kills

Questioning US Soldiers

I arrived at the US military base Salerno in east Afghanistan's Khost province. Camp Salerno, which adjoins the provincial capital also called Khost, is one of the main bases on the eastern front. In the early days of the US invasion it was subjected to frequent rocket attacks by insurgent groups and so acquired the inglorious nickname "Rocket City."

I stayed here waiting for permission to accompany the troops on their front line mission. Though I had been led to think that I would be able to start working outside the base right away, I ended up waiting for ten full days.

I used that time to talk with many new recruits. I wanted to know what sort of thoughts led young people to become soldiers. Many young men and women are in the army. I wanted to know why.

Why They Became Soldiers

The first soldier I interviewed was a youth of twenty-one. The officer in charge of public relations brought him in. I was told he was an Officer Cadet attached to headquarters.

Evidently his father is a military man and his goal is to become a splendid soldier like his father. He is not afraid of the Taliban, and is filled with soldierly pride. He says he has come here in order to bring peace and reconstruction to Afghanistan. He sounds just like a military spokesman. I'd like to hear something a little closer to his true feelings.

During interviews, almost all the answers are like this. The army's media education is thorough. The content of the questions must be submitted in advance. Because the PR officer is present, even one-on-one conversation is difficult.

The army permits reporting under its auspices because this is to its advantage. They will never show anything that might be to its disadvantage. But they are dealing with people. At times real feelings happen to spill over.

A woman soldier from a minority background talks with me inside a car as she guides me around the base.

"I want to go home. I didn't want to join the army. I got in at seventeen, right after leaving high school. At seventeen you can't sign the enlistment papers by yourself. My mama just went ahead and signed them. I want to go back soon."

The United States has a system that allows those who join the military to attend university nearly free of charge, so many join up for that reason. This young woman comes from a poor and small town. Among the developed nations, the United States is the country with the greatest disparity between rich and poor. For those born in provincial towns and villages it is difficult to rise economically. If they hope for a better life, joining the army – dangerous though it is – offers the only way out.

America's reason for stationing troops in Afghanistan is "to save Afghanistan." Everyone says it unanimously. But do teenagers who can hardly control their lives risk those lives to join the army "to save Afghanistan?"

A 19-year old Hispanic woman soldier I interviewed at Camp Salerno says it without hesitation: "I don't know anything about the Taliban, or others like them. All I know is that they are bad people."

She is not shy about her motives.

"I joined the army because I wanted to get out of the little Texas town that I'm from. My friends said I'd gone crazy. But I don't care."

She joined the army at eighteen. Seventeen or eighteen – these are still children. They enter the army before they are capable of judging things as adults.

Last year alone two hundred and twenty US soldiers died in Afghanistan. There is no guarantee that she will not be next.

Big Leagues and TV Games

The atmosphere is not in the least soldierly. Nearly all the talk is about big league sports and TV games. Inside the base, they have almost no contact with Afghans.

Even on patrols, the only time they leave the base, they only see the town through the thick bulletproof glass of an armored vehicle.

I suddenly recall the words of an Afghan friend: "The Americans intend to massacre us."

His overly intense way of speaking stays strongly in my memory. But perhaps it is not so. The American soldiers' minds are mostly occupied with thoughts of big league sports and home. Not merely ignorant about Afghanistan, they are indifferent to it. Yet every year many thousands of Afghans are killed by US armed attacks.

It may be a commonplace to say that "ignorance kills." Yet it is an indisputable fact that the US military is killing Afghans on a massive scale.

A Prayer For Husband and Son Killed by an Air Strike

Mother Zuraiha has spread a mat on top of the snow, and is trying to warm her body as best she can by exposing it to sunlight.

She lives alone in a small tent. The tent, such as it is, is a crude thing made not from vinyl but from patched scraps of cloth. There is nothing inside the tent but a slender wooden pole and thin bedding. The temperature is just below freezing. Her body motionless, Mother Zuraiha is praying to God ever so quietly.

Mother Zuraiha lives on a vacant lot called Chamara Babrak in north Kabul. Many refugees live nearby in the tents they have put up. Three hundred refugee families moved here in November of last year. All are from the village of Hashur in Helmand province, a region of fierce fighting. Following last November's American and British air strikes, the villagers fled for their lives.

The US army's objective in occupying the country is evidently to "rescue and reconstruct Afghanistan." At least that is what they say. But not a single person who lives in this camp believes their words.

Mother Zuraiha's Story

What happened in your village? I ask.

Mother Zuraiha tells me, tears trickling down her face.

That day, Mother Zuraiha and her son Naser, almost 23, were washing their donkey in the yard. Her husband was drinking tea inside the house. From the other side of the mountains, they heard the sound of an airplane. Since many US troops are deployed in the area, she did not pay it much attention.

Suddenly there was a terrific explosion. The following instant Mother Zuraiha found herself lying next to a pile of rubble. The house had been smashed to pieces. She searched for her son. He should have been right next to her. He was lying quite a distance away. She shook her son to wake him up, but he did not respond. With much effort she lifted him in her arms and saw some of his brain protruding from his head.

She sought her neighbors' help in trying to save her husband. But they were all running about in confusion, and her voice did not reach them. Even now when she has left her village, her husband's body remains crushed beneath their house.

As she spoke, she said the word "tikatikadon" any number of times. In Dali, the word means "air strike." Each time she utters this all too common word, her face becomes distorted with pain. Mother Zuraiha herself was wounded. The air strike left injuries over her whole body.

Why was your village attacked?

"Would a woman like me understand why? We're ordinary peasants. Now I'm just so sad that I lost my husband and son."

What do you think about the foreign army?

"I don't understand why they do such heartless things. But they probably trust too much in their own strength."

Mother Zuraiha continues

"Here I'm just praying for my husband and son. If someone brings me food, I'll eat it. If no one brings it, I'll sit here hungry. Life here is terrible. Sometimes I think it would be better for me to die. How good it would've been if I'd been able to die the day my husband died. Life here is truly miserable. Thank you for listening to me, my son."

She calls me her son. In Afghanistan one calls male neighbors to whom one feels close "son." Finding even recollections of the past events hateful, Mother Zuraiha says nothing more.

This year Afghanistan has been hit by an unusually severe cold wave, and more than 1,100 people have died throughout the country. In Kabul too, late night temperatures drop as low as minus 30 degrees Celsius [minus 22 F]. I wonder if Mother Zuraiha will be able to survive the winter.

Dropping bombs and drinking cola

Have US soldiers ever tried to imagine the aftermath of an air strike? Most likely they have not. Pilots take off from the base and fly to the location they have been told to fly to. They push a button, the bombs drop and go off with a bang. They return to base, drink a coke, and go to bed. Though they are in Afghanistan, they never come in contact with Afghanistan. But air strike victims like Mother Zuraiha certainly exist. The soldiers are completely insulated from that reality.

Mother Zuraiha is one of a multitude of refugees. This year too, as the snow melts, the fighting is intensifying. Will ignorant soldiers resume dropping their bombs and go on increasing the number of victims like Grandmother Zuraiha?

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