



Farida, aged 3, in the IDP camp in Kabul where she lives with her mother Bibi Sakina

Afghanistan: A future stolen

Following the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, the West must not abandon its people – especially its women and girls – to an awful fate, writes **Glyn Strong**

Picking up the pieces

When did Afghanistan become the elephant in the room? For me it was the day that a letter in my village magazine berated our local MP for putting the needs of refugees higher up the agenda than ‘the pothole situation’ on her doorstep. Coming just weeks after the launch of *Operation Warm Welcome* it struck a somewhat discordant note.

The evacuation in August had been hailed as an overwhelming success. True, there were disturbing scenes of violence at Kabul Airport – and who could forget the sight of the man so desperate to leave his country that he clung to the wheel arch of a departing C17 – but the UK did evacuate 15,000 people; Prime Minister Boris Johnson hailed *Operation Pitting* as “one of the great achievements of our UK Armed Services and their civilian counterparts in the post-war era” and medals were awarded accordingly.

But what next? While praising the operation to get so many key people out of Afghanistan presented politicians with the opportunity to snatch a small victory from the jaws of a large defeat, its halo effect didn’t last long and the international community is

now faced with the reality of either punishing the de facto government – or punishing the Afghan people.

It’s an impasse that no-one wants to tackle. The range of stakeholders in Afghanistan’s future is diverse and opinion about the Taliban, polarised. Some believe that, with a humanitarian disaster of epic proportions looming, it’s time to heed General David Richards’ advice as he urges magnanimity in defeat.

“This undeniably is a defeat” he insists. “What happens next is hugely important to the men and women of the armed forces who fought there.” (During the UK’s 20 years of deployment in Afghanistan 457 armed forces personnel died and more than 240 lost limbs).

“The UK went into Afghanistan for strategic reasons, largely to ensure that it remained a friendly state and didn’t become part of the legacy of Osama bin Laden. The thousands of soldiers, sailors and airmen I commanded there as COMISAF and as Chief of the Defence Staff didn’t deserve to see this result. It’s another important reason why we must do our best to see that Afghanistan doesn’t fall back into the state that it was in

the late 1990s.

“We can’t afford to punish and alienate the Afghan people – for strategic and moral reasons. This is not what we went to war to achieve; what is happening is the result of a political decision and it’s totally unacceptable. We must have a strategy that seeks to influence and not just punish the new government. It is morally wrong to condemn innocent people. By engaging with the moderate Taliban we can marginalise the less acceptable members and engage more meaningfully with those we can work with.”

Afghan assets were frozen when the Taliban took over, but without access to funds the country will implode. Hope, too, will die, making a mockery of the commitment to ‘enduring freedom’ that drove the US-led war on terror. The situation is now parlous – for the women, girls and young people who fear that their futures have been snatched away; for the families selling their children in order to buy food and firewood; and for those deemed to be ‘tainted’ by association with the previous regime and threatened with violence.

Further afield Afghan citizens wait in the limbo of displaced persons camps and, here

in the UK, restive families kick their heels in hotels, dreaming of a visionary home that exists somewhere between memory and imagination.

Minister for Afghan Resettlement, Victoria Atkins, said, "The UK has made one of the largest commitments of any country to resettle at-risk Afghan citizens. More than 4,000 people have moved, or are being moved, into their new homes since the first ARAP flights in June. Through our huge cross-Government effort and in partnership with local authorities and the private rented sector, we will continue to secure permanent homes for Afghan families so they can settle and rebuild their lives."

Compromise

Back in Afghanistan reports are contradictory. In some areas girls' schools have been closed, but others say the Taliban are supportive of girls' education. They are not a homogenous group however, which perhaps reinforces General Richards' view that overtures to moderates will marginalise extremists. If a Taliban government is to survive, it must be pragmatic – and that means compromise. However, some believe that no spoon is long enough to sup with these particular 'devils'.

Rahela Siddiqi, prominent activist and founder of the educational scholarship trust that bears her name, is one of them:

"Regarding any talks with the Taliban, all I can say is that there has been a great deal of violence and if the international community engages with the Taliban it must go in hard because innocent people have been killed.

We (*the Rahela Trust*) are presently supporting 20 women through university in Afghanistan - in Helmand, in Kabul and in Kandahar - and 15 students who have graduated. Four of them have been threatened; one, who is divorced with a child, is in a desperate situation. The Taliban allow this only because they are at private universities."

Rahela highlights an incident related to her by the cousin of a family in Kunduz. "The Taliban targeted them in early February. After watching them at lunch they joined the family to eat desert, then took out the 27-year-

IT'S HEART-BREAKING TO SEE THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF SO MANY INSPIRATIONAL WOMEN JEOPARDISED... UNTIL RECENTLY THESE BRAVE, DYNAMIC WOMEN HAD A PROFILE AND A VOICE; THEY WERE SHAPING THE FUTURE OF THEIR COUNTRY. NOW THEY'RE IN LIMBO ASKING, 'WHO'S LISTENING AND WHAT'S HAPPENING NEXT?'
BARONESS FIONA HODGSON

old son to kill him. When his father pursued them, they shot him dead. Both bodies were later discovered, brutally disfigured.

"I couldn't sit at the table with people who are murderers," she insists. "Afghanistan is now hostage to the Taliban. They should know that if they want to lead a nation, they must show that they are with and for its people."

So what's the answer? Any handover of power is complicated, but the fall of the Afghan Government was unmoderated and unforeseen. The Taliban had no experience of statecraft or government. Blame, rumour and fear conspired to fuel a tsunami of panic that unnerved everyone.

New realities

Now, as the dust begins to settle, there are new realities to contend with – record drought, soaring food prices, internal displacement, severe economic downturn, extreme cold weather and the collapse of public services. Many NGOs have departed and sanctions against the Taliban have exacerbated the hardships that are impacting on the most vulnerable.

'M' who lives in Kandahar with his extended family, is one of them. He worked in a government office; when the regime

collapsed, he lost his job and was targeted for 'punishment' by the Taliban. He stares death in the face – only the guise in which it arrives is uncertain. Will it be by violence, cold or starvation? Through friends he sends desperate *WhatsApp* texts asking for money, but the small amounts that get through don't last long. He depends on the kindness of strangers, but they can't give indefinitely.

Bibi Sakina, 38, lives in Charqala-e Wazirabad IDP camp in Kabul with her six children. The family is struggling to survive. Her oldest son collects garbage for recycling but can only earn 500-600 Afghani (less than £5) per month.

"Sometimes we don't have any food to cook for a couple of days so we have to survive on tea and bread. The price of foodstuffs and fuel for heating and cooking has doubled since the takeover" Bibi Sakina explains through the *Norwegian Refugee Council*. "I have followed the situation about the sanctions and the freezing of Afghan funds on the radio. I ask the world to help us and encourage the international community to release the money that belongs to Afghanistan so that we can have jobs and opportunities again."

Starvation

Of course, 'M' and Bibi Sakina are not special. According to the UN World Food Programme over half of Afghanistan's population are facing starvation. Nine hundred miles away, another Afghan man agonises about his future. 'A' is a doctor – an oncologist, with sought-after qualifications in public health and an inspirational track record in helping Afghanistan's breast cancer victims. He speaks fluent English and has family in the UK and US. He was caught up in the violence at Kabul Airport and didn't get out. Now in a holding camp in Abu Dhabi, he lives like a prisoner, often not leaving his small room for weeks. He has an ARAP (Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy) case number but feels he has been forgotten.

Many of the journalists, like myself, who visited Afghanistan between 2001/21 did so to meet its women – the faceless burqa-clad icons of a society in which male dominance was almost absolute. We reported on forced marriages, 'honour' killings (often of rape victims), acts of self-immolation and maternal health problems on an industrial scale.

A shortage of midwives, ignorance about breast cancer and general lack of access to timely medical treatment meant that hundreds were dying needlessly. But things were changing and it soon became evident that Afghan women were neither passive nor complicit in their subjugation; they were strong, capable and desperate to effect change.

Reversal of progress

Around 46% of Afghanistan's population is under 15 years of age which means that many Afghans were born and grew up alongside a Western military presence, with



Charqala IDP camp, Kabul, in January

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its talk of Millennium Development Goals for Women, capacity building, education and empowerment. Whatever alleged hidden agenda – oil, opium, anti-terrorist activity – underlay Western investment, a belief grew that things were possible. Women joined the ANP and ANA (Afghan National Police & Army), they flew helicopters, became journalists, midwives, governors and ministers. It wasn't perfect, but it was progress.

Now the country is at risk of haemorrhaging talent - its female robotics, cricket and football teams have already left because they see no future for themselves there; women have been sent home from work and, if reports are to be believed, terrorised, arrested and killed for protesting.

Baroness Fiona Hodgson chairs the UK-based *Afghan Women's Support Forum*, an eclectic networking group that has been uniting Afghan women (and men) for over a decade, bringing together activists, students, journalists, doctors, diplomats and various members of the Afghan diaspora:

"It's heart-breaking to see the achievements of so many inspirational women jeopardised. Over the years I have seen them grow in strength and confidence, celebrate educational achievements and make real progress towards peace building. It is unthinkable that these gains should be lost and yet everyone feels so helpless. Until recently these brave, dynamic women had a profile and a voice; they were shaping the future of their country. Now they're in



Three of Bibi Sakina's children, Nabila (8), Farida (3) and Amanullah (12) huddle together under a blanket that the family is keeping warm with a plastic container of hot water. The blanket was provided by the Norwegian Refugee Council

PHOTO: ©CHRISTIAN JEPSON/NRC

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY IS NOW FACED WITH THE REALITY OF EITHER PUNISHING THE DE FACTO GOVERNMENT – OR PUNISHING THE AFGHAN PEOPLE

must not hide behind him. They could have been more robust. But it's not too late - if we don't compound our errors by allowing the humanitarian disaster to continue; if we engage and persuade (the Taliban), through non-military means, to respect human rights, women's rights, perhaps we can rebuild our stock and influence in the region." ■

limbo asking, 'Who's listening and what's happening next?'"

General Richards is unequivocal about the West's legacy: "History says the Afghans won't judge us kindly. There was no military requirement or popular political reason for us to withdraw. The decision was taken by President Biden; the US and UK military advised against it but European leaders



Glyn Strong is a freelance writer, journalist, photographer, film-maker and media consultant. Her media career began at *The*

Guardian in the 1970s. Since then she has worked for a wide variety of publications and visited more than 50 countries.

In 1994 she left journalism to work for the Armed Forces, running civilian/military news teams in Bosnia and Kuwait and operating in the Falkland Islands, Hungary, Kosovo, Germany, Italy and Holland.

After several years with the Army she became Head of External Communication for the Royal Air Force before being appointed Assistant Director of Public Relations at the Ministry of Defence, responsible for non-news media and documentaries.

She left Whitehall in April 2007 to return to independent journalism reporting from Belarus, Lebanon, Sudan, Afghanistan and Palestine.

REQUIEM

Sir James Adams KCMG, Ambassador to Tunisia and Egypt, on 24 April 2020

Sir Martin Berthoud KCVO CMG, on 20 January 2022

Mr Roger Cook, in January 2021

Mr John Robert de Fonblanque CMG, on 26 November 2021

Mr Richard Dorman CBE, British High Commissioner in Vanuatu, on 9 January 2022

Mr L R Etheridge MVO, on 12 December 2021

Mr Simon Hemans CMG CVO, Ambassador to Ukraine and High Commissioner to Kenya, on 17 December 2021

Lady (Faith) Hervey, wife of Sir Roger Hervey, on 31 January 2022

Mr Tim C Lamb, on 28 October 2021

Mr Michael Thomas Murray, on 16 January 2022

Mrs Audrey Rankin, on 24 November 2021

Miss June Reid, on 24 February 2022

Mr Jeffrey (Jeff) Roberts, on 5 February 2022

Mr John Sanders, Ambassador to Panama, on 4 December 2021

Sir Crispin Tickell GCMG KCVO, on 25 January 2022

Shaded word: RAPPORTEUR

Crossword solution

Across:
1 Brush up, 5 Cabaret, 9 Godol, 10 Scutcheon, 11 Tar, 12 Heart, 13 Wasps, 14 Magnate, 16 Rate, 18 Debut, 20 Moreish, 21 River, 23 Order, 25 Cow, 27 Undertone, 28 Flour, 29 Transit, 30 Seethes.

Down:
1 Bright, 2 Underaged, 3 Hutch, 4 Passage, 5 Counter, 6 Backwater, 7 Rheas, 8 Tunesmith, 14 Minor suit, 15 Ambergis, 17 Loincloth, 19 Took out, 20 Madness, 22 Vodka, 24 Rifle, 27 Words..