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On the killing of eight Afghan women

John Dear S.J. | Sep. 25, 2012 On the Road to Peace

If you looked carefully at the news last week, you might have heard a report from Afghanistan about how the U.S./NATO forces bombed and killed eight Afghan women who were out walking in the mountains early in the morning before dawn to collect wood. Eight other women were seriously injured.

But you probably didn't hear that story. Who cares about the death of eight Afghan women from our bombs?

So a few women were killed in our nation's longest war in a remote mountainous region on the other side of the world. That's the cost of war. That's what we call "collateral damage." There's nothing that can be done. It was probably their fault anyway. They were probably Taliban rebels. Don't give it another thought. What about poor Lindsay Lohan, Kate Middleton, or Katie Holmes? Now there's a real story.

That's what the culture of war would tell us.

The Gospel of peace suggests otherwise. Jesus always, always, always sides with those most marginalized, threatened and hurt by the culture of war, beginning with women and children. If we Christians take the Gospel seriously, then we know the nonviolent Jesus grieves for these women, welcomes them into paradise, and holds in contempt the forces of death that killed them. In other words, the nonviolent Jesus cares -- and so should we who claim to follow him.

I know this sounds harsh and judgmental, but what is our response to our nation's massacre of these eight women and the hundreds of other women and children we've killed in Afghanistan?

This week, I invite us to spend some time meditating on those eight women, who were out walking before dawn in the harsh stony landscape in the Laghman Province, near the village of Dilaram, east of Kabul, trying to gather some wood for the morning fire to cook a little food for their families. Then, all of a sudden, out of the blue, they are blown up by our fighter bombers. "Operation Enduring Freedom" strikes again.

Think of their lives. Think of their poverty. Think of them walking in the dark before dawn. Think of the struggle they endured just to survive life in the harshest environment on the planet: Afghanistan. And think of that ever-present threat of death hanging over them -- our war planes, fighter bombers and drones, under the benevolent auspices of NATO, ostensibly on the lookout to protect Afghan women from the Taliban. (Of course, we now know that our war is all about natural resources, setting up a new oil pipeline from Iraq through Iran through Afghanistan, a conduit for natural gas and fossil fuels from the basin of the Caspian Sea, and of course, creating a new strategic outpost for the U.S. empire on the border of its future enemy, China.)

The U.S. said afterward its bombing attack was "targeting 45 insurgents," but tragically, it killed the eight women. The Pentagon offered its "deepest regrets and sympathies" to the families and loved ones of the civilians killed and injured.

Afterward, dozens of tribesmen from Alingar drove to the provincial capital of Mihtarlam, carrying the bodies

of some of the women who were killed. They stopped outside the governor's office and shouted, "Death to America!" Pictures of the dead women were front-page news in Asian newspapers, such as *The Times of India*. Millions of people around the world grieve for these women and rage against the American empire and its wars. There's no wonder that riots and attacks against American embassies occur almost daily now.

"Scant attention is paid to the plight of the families whose mothers have been slain by U.S./NATO military forces which claim state of the art drone surveillance capacity," Kathy Kelly wrote in an email to me after I asked for her comments about the killings. She's now on her way again to Afghanistan, where she spent much of the summer. "And yet, U.S. officials have repeatedly claimed that the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan is necessary to protect women and children. In spite of the constant drone surveillance which purportedly supplies the U.S. military with intelligence about patterns of life in Afghanistan, the U.S. military seemed unaware that women typically scour the mountainsides looking for firewood so that they can heat water and prepare meals. A BBC video shows that other women and girls who survived the attack are now hospitalized because of their severe injuries. By now, news coverage of families in the Alingar District is likely over, but the effects of this attack will forever alter the lives of the injured survivors, their families and the families and friends of those who were killed."

Almost 2,000 U.S. soldiers have been killed in our 11-year war on Afghanistan. How many civilians have we killed in Afghanistan? *The Guardian* of London says [1] in the last six years, 12,793 civilians have been killed. Wikipedia features dozens of reports and puts the numbers generally at "tens of thousands," but says that's an underestimate. In other words, no one knows. And, it seems, few care. Or perhaps the Pentagon will never allow those numbers to be known.

Earlier this year, for example, a U.S. Army sergeant shot and killed 16 innocent Afghan civilians. Nine of them were children; one was a 3-year-old girl. He shot many of them in the head before he piled together 11 of the bodies and set them on fire.

These days, I'm preparing to head to Los Angeles to lead a retreat on the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. "Love your enemies," Jesus commands in the Sermon on the Mount, "then you will be sons and daughters of your heavenly God who lets the sun shine on the good and the bad and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust." St. Augustine responded a few centuries later that sometimes the best way to love our enemies is to kill them. Others likewise rejected the nonviolence of Jesus and created the pagan just war theory that still determines our social outlook today. But Jesus calls us to an entirely new way of relating with everyone on the planet. He has something to say about our nation's killing of these women.

For the record, the Gospel insists: No cause is worth the death of a single human being. We are called to practice universal nonviolent love. This stupid, senseless, evil war is not worth the death of these eight women, not to mention the tens of thousands of other civilians killed, or the many more combatants.

We need to end this war immediately. It's a useless exercise in mass murder. For those of us who dare claim to be Christian, it goes against everything the nonviolent Jesus stands for.

"Blessed are those who mourn," Jesus says at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. "Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice. Blessed are the peacemakers." We won't hear these teachings discussed in the presidential debates, but this is what we should all be addressing -- the need to fulfill Jesus' vision and create a new world without war, poverty and bombs.

I invite us to spend some time these days mourning and grieving the deaths of these eight women and all those killed in our senseless war in Afghanistan. I hope their deaths will touch us, break our hearts, lead us back to the God of peace, and push us to stand up and demand an end to this war and all our global war-making.

Together, let us pray for them, the women and children of Afghanistan, for all our own people who are dropping the bombs, and the end of this war. Let us pray that instead, we might make restitution, rebuild Afghanistan and start down the new road of creative nonviolence.

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John Dear will lead a daylong retreat, "Blessed are the Peacemakers," Sept. 29 at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. He will speak on "Thomas Merton and the Wisdom of Nonviolence" Oct. 6 in Belleville, Ill., near St. Louis. On Oct. 28, he will give a talk about *Lazarus, Come Forth!* at Maryknoll in Ossining, N.Y. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website [2]. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [3], explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire* [4]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [5] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* *[6]*; *Put Down Your Sword* *[7]* and *A Persistent Peace* *[8]*, are available from Amazon.com.

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