

SILENCE ISN'T PEACE



The Afghan war is over, unless you happen to live in Afghanistan. Day 100 of the war brought with it another round of bombings that the villagers of Zhawar have become accustomed to. They live in daily (and nightly) fear of the bombing. Even the interim Afghan government is becoming fed up with US planes striking at deserted al Qaida bases. But who cares?

The world has lost interest in Afghanistan. The flickering screens that command our attention have moved on to other issues. Afghanistan becomes a war but not a war. Like the 10 years of weekly bombings in Iraq it is becoming part of the contorted language that defines bombing as part of the peace rather than as an act of war. The international community may not be wholly comfortable about this, but no nation will now challenge any presumption by the US government to attack, undermine, assassinate or intervene in any

situation that threatens American strategic interests. It is inconceivable that any reversed scenario would be tolerated by the USA if a country sought to similarly protect itself from undermining by the American government.

If George W Bush concludes that his pretzel crisis was a cunningly disguised al Qaida plot, pretzel bakeries across the Middle East and the USA will be 'taken out'. Pretzels themselves will be redefined as weapons of mass destruction. The CIA will produce supporting video evidence. And Bin Laden will be seen demonstrating how to cook Islamic mantras into the mix so that the pretzels stick in the throats of non-believers.

Beyond the ironies of Bush being struck down from the presidential couch, there are more serious issues to address about where the 'war on terrorism' has taken the world. Everywhere you look is plagued with insecurity and intolerance. The powerful abandon peace processes in favour of rooting out terrorists. State terrorism has been given a new lease of life. Israel, Colombia, India and Pakistan teeter around in renewed antagonisms. Other states will follow. If the war moves on to Somalia, the Sudan, Syria or Iraq it will generate grievance and division, rather than justice and stability.

The United Nations has acquired a monastic silence about the way the last semblances of an international justice system are being abandoned. Nowhere is this more evident than in the treatment of prisoners taken during the Afghan war. Stripped of rights, stripped of dignity, stripped of any recognised status in international law, the prisoners have been consigned to a nether world of non-existence.

The US government refuses to recognise them as either criminals or prisoners of war. They have neither the right to trial before national or international courts, nor the protection of the Geneva Convention. By defining prisoners as 'unlawful combatants', the Bush administration has created a new category of non-person, whose life is entirely dependent on the whims of the US military. In fact, the prisoners are portrayed not only as non-persons, but non-human.

When General Richard B. Myers, the US Chief of Joint Staffs, described those who were flown, manacled and hooded, to Guantanamo Bay as being 'so dangerous that they would gnaw through the hydraulic cables' of their transport plane as part of their suicide mentality, he was describing animals, not people. The US may have failed to find bin Laden, but they wish us to believe they have captured Hannibal Lecter - thousands of him.

Even those charged with acts of genocide in Rwanda and Yugoslavia are to be brought before an international tribunal, where there is a burden of proof, the scrutiny of evidence, the right to an informed defence and an independent panel of judges. This is what we must be demanding now. The British government cannot condone the current treatment of prisoners from the Afghan war. It makes no difference whether three or three hundred British subjects turn out to be amongst them. It is a matter of humanity, rather than nationality.

If the Labour government cannot bring itself to denounce the rough justice of the new 'Pax Americana', we must at least demand US compliance with the tenets (and conventions) of international law. Anything less would sink towards the mindset of the Taliban.

Postscript

You can press your own MP to support this by asking them to add their name to EDM 649, submitted by Jeremy Corbyn, Tam Dalyell, Alan Simpson and John McDonnell. The EDM reads:

'That this House believes that all detainees/prisoners taken in the course of the conflict in Afghanistan should be treated in accordance with the Geneva Convention: notes that the hooding and chaining of prisoners prior to their removal to a US base in Guantanamo Bay to face special military tribunals has no basis in international law; and call on the UK Government to dissociate itself from this process and reiterate the principle of the primacy of the Geneva Convention'