

In Afghanistan, Paying for War is Easier than Paying for Peace

By Frida Berrigan, World Policy Institute

As Washington prepares for war in Iraq, officials are trying to reassure Afghanistan that it will not be lost in the shuffle. Muhammad Ali, heavy weight champ and UN Messenger of Peace, recently completed a three-day tour of Afghanistan where he tried to focus international attention on the country's plight and gave volleyballs and jumping ropes to children. U.S. Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill also came, bearing promises that the war in Iraq would not derail Washington's commitment to rebuilding Afghanistan.

But Afghanistan needs more than reassurance and high-level visits, it need a massive influx of humanitarian and reconstruction aid. Recognizing this, Congress recently approved a \$2.3 billion aid package for Afghanistan over the next four years, and another \$1 billion to fund the peacekeeping effort. While that is more than the Bush administration requested, it is just a drop in an ocean of need. The United Nations estimates that the reconstruction effort alone will cost between \$10-15 billion, on top of the billions needed to address the humanitarian crisis. President Bush proudly cited the "true strength of character and kindness of the American people," in aiding Afghanistan and highlighted the Fund for Afghan Children, which raised \$10.5 million from U.S. schoolchildren. This is a laudable effort but pales beside the hundreds of millions spent during the last presidential campaign. And it is almost insignificant compared to the estimated \$2.5 billion the administration is spending each month to prosecute the war.

Joseph Biden (D-DE) remarked that the aid would help keep Afghanistan "from sliding back into chaos and becoming a haven for terrorists again." But a close look at what is

happening on the ground reveals that it might be too late to stave off chaos and keep terrorism at bay. Afghanistan is far from stable. U.S. troops in Afghanistan are being fired on by Al Qaeda an average of three times a week. There has been a ten-fold increase in opium production in the past year, and the drug lords are Northern Alliance leaders and U.S. allies who helped oust the Taliban. The Afghani police killed two students who were part of a demonstration protesting the lack of electricity and running water in their dorms. The government of President Hamid Karzai is so shaky that he counts on three separate security details—his own, U.S. Special Forces, and personnel from a private military company called DynCorp.

The humanitarian crisis is critical. According to the United Nations, half of all Afghan children suffer from chronic malnutrition and one out of every four children dies before the age of five. There are almost 4 million Afghan refugees, mostly women and children. An estimated 16,000 women are dying each year from pregnancy-related causes; this is the 2nd-highest maternal mortality rate in the world. Afghanistan's ability to produce food has been seriously reduced; grain production has fallen by more than 50% in the past two years, and livestock herds are severely depleted. The primary road network is in shambles, with half in need of reconstruction. Outside of Kabul many people still walk three miles to get water.

Terrorism remains an issue, but more and more the terrorized are Afghani civilians. In a recently released report, Human Rights Watch asserts that U.S. military forces are actively backing Ismail Khan, a warlord in western Afghanistan with a disastrous human rights record. Earlier this year, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald

Rumsfeld met with Khan and described him as “an appealing person,” but those suffering beneath his rule would not agree. Human Rights Watch documents widespread abuses by officials under Khan’s command, including arbitrary and politically motivated arrests, intimidation, extortion, and torture.

While the United States is shirking its responsibility to contribute to the momentous task of rebuilding and reestablishing stability in

Afghanistan, the Bush administration is willing to pay for a new war against Iraq that will not come at a discount. Yale economist William Nordhaus estimates the economic impacts of war in Iraq could be as large as \$120 billion to \$1.5 trillion. These staggering figures take into account the effects of possible disruption in the oil markets, Iraqi use of chemical and biological weapons, the costs of an extended military occupation of Iraq, and other factors that have not been addressed in estimates to date.

Another cost of this new war may be the continued suffering of the Afghani people. And another casualty of war in Iraq will almost certainly be that stability and democracy is once again deferred in Afghanistan.

*(Frida Berrigan
<BerrigaF@newschool.edu> writes
regularly for Foreign Policy In
Focus (online at www.fpif.org) and
is a senior research associate at the
World Policy Institute.)*