



WATCHING BRIEF 21-8: AFGHANISTAN AND AUSTRALIA

As Quakers we seek a world without war. We seek a sustainable and just community. We have a vision of an Australia that upholds human rights and builds peace internationally, with particular focus on our region. In our approach to government, we will promote the importance of dialogue, of listening and of seeking that of God in every person. We aim to work for justice and to take away the occasion for war.

August 2021

The fall of the government of Afghanistan has generated much consternation and alarm within and beyond the country. The future under Taliban control is fraught with danger for many. The Taliban leadership has said it will not seek revenge on those who have worked for the UN, the US and its allies, and NGOs, and will respect women's rights to education and work 'within Sharia'.

What has led to the present situation?

After years of peace, notably between 1929 and 1978, Afghanistan experienced a Marxist coup, and so began a series of wars. The Soviet Union invaded in 1979 and that war lasted for ten years. Between 1992 and 2001 the Taliban (backed by Pakistan) took power. In 2003 the US and NATO intervened, and war has continued at differing levels of violence until this year. Australia has been part of the UN and US activities since 2003. The country has been in a state of chaos for many years.

Background Information from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) website.

- A landlocked country that borders Pakistan, Iran, China, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan. A population of 38 million, 4.4m in Kabul, the capital. Main ethnic groups – Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara. Mostly Sunni Muslims.
- A government system that includes an elected President and National Assembly (two chambers). 34 provinces with governors appointed by the President. Women's participation in political structures has increased to around one-third since 2004 legislation.

- Between 2003 and 2014, following the defeat of the Taliban, the UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) sought to create security and stability. From 2015 this was replaced by the Resolute Support Mission (RSM) of NATO to assist the Afghan government. There has also been a UN Assistance Mission (UNAMA) since 2002 coordinating civilian efforts towards peace and reconciliation, monitoring human rights and promoting good governance. Australians have contributed to all these missions.
- Australia has had diplomatic relations with Afghanistan since 1969, and has focused especially on health and economic development. Since 2014 our government has given \$134m in humanitarian assistance, and in 2020-21 will give \$8m via the World Food Program, \$2m through the UN Office of Humanitarian Affairs, and \$1.5m through the UN Population Fund. Foreign aid has been given for agriculture.
- Australia has supported programs to empower women and girls, such as challenging violence against women, setting up protection centres, training police and judges in gender issues, and training teachers on women's rights. Australia has also supported education programs for girls in remote regions, and programs to improve women's economic wellbeing, under the international *Women, Peace and Security* framework.

Analysis and Commentary

John Sopko, US Special Inspector-General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, reported in detail (August 2021) on the US role in Afghanistan as follows:

“The US government spent 20 years and \$145b trying to rebuild Afghanistan, its security forces, civilian government institutions, economy and civil society. The Department of Defence spent \$837b on warfighting. 2443 Americans and 1144 Allied troops have been killed and 20,666 UN troops wounded. At least 66,000 Afghan troops have been killed. More than 48,000 Afghan civilians have been killed, and at least 75,000 injured since 2001”. He suggests that changing goals for intervention have been set over the years, and progress has been elusive.

William Maley (ANU) has written extensively about Afghanistan for many years. He has identified lessons to be learned from its history – (a) religion and politics are uneasy partners, (b) revolution is a dangerous process, and (c) civil society flourishes only when the state functions properly and does not constrain individual lives too much. In an article in *The Australian* on 8 July 2021 he says that the US preoccupation with Iraq prevented it from having a coherent strategy in Afghanistan. He draws attention to the plight of Afghans who have worked with the US and its allies, as a result of the US decision to pull out rapidly. He says the Taliban is authoritarian – and arrogantly thinks that it has solutions to all the problems of the world. Its extreme behaviour while in power in earlier years makes it more likely it will not accommodate the other ethnic groups and this will lead to civil war.

Diana Sayed, of the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights, said (*The Drum*, ABC TV on 16 August 2021) that Afghans in the diaspora have for years experienced trauma, anxious about their families in Afghanistan, and have longed for a new era for their country. She said their hopes have been dashed and that the various advances for women are likely to be reversed by the Taliban. She called for action by the Australian Government to accept as many refugees as possible and to ensure that those already here on temporary visas be given permanency.

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Azadah Raz Mohammad (Melbourne University) wrote in *The Conversation* (17 August 2021) that most of those fleeing Afghanistan are women and children. She recalled that during the Taliban rule from 1996 women had to cover themselves, have a male companion when they left home, could not attend school or work outside the home, and not vote. Penalties including flogging were common. Today women hold many positions in government, politics and business, have many human rights and can attend universities. She fears that the return of the Taliban will lead to regressive moves including forced marriages and denial of education for girls and women.

Australia's Role

David Watt (Parliamentary Library) said Australia first committed military personnel in 2001 (under the ANZUS Treaty). Between 2006 and 2010 Australia worked in partnership with the Netherlands in Uruzgan province, mainly doing mentoring and reconstruction. When the Dutch withdrew Australia joined the US-led multinational command to protect civilians and train Afghan soldiers “to combat a clear threat from international terrorism to both international security and our own national security” (*Australian Defence Minister* 2010). Police were added to the force to train local police.

Marcus Thompson (*The Australian*, 17 August 2021) reported that more than 26,000 Australian service men and women served in Afghanistan, and these veterans experienced many challenges. Many families were affected by their absences, infrequent contact, negative news stories, and constant uncertainty.

John Blaxland (ANU) wrote in *The Conversation* (17 August 2021) that Australia has a moral responsibility to get out as many Afghans who helped our activities there. He reflected that a vast military power has been outfoxed by a Taliban force that has outmatched the coalition for morale, resolve and endurance. Tony Walker (La Trobe University) commented in *The Conversation* (17 August 2021) that Australia's ill-considered participation in an open-ended commitment should attract censure.

Bernard Keane (*Crikey*, 17 August 2021) reminded us that our government has been slow to prosecute those soldiers alleged to have committed war crimes in Afghanistan, putting military reputation ahead of justice. He said “a proper accounting would recognise the failure of our military to prevent a culture of atrocities among our forces and the lack of justice for its victims”.

The Australian Defence Association (ADA) says: “Australia's (not just the ADF's) focus must be on preventing future war crimes by ADF personnel. Not debating if war crimes in Afghanistan actually occurred. The reforms require structural and cultural change in some Special Forces units. Including the dismissal of personnel still in-denial about the severity of the problem after the Brereton Inquiry has reported in such detail. Some reforms cannot await the completion of any criminal and disciplinary proceedings. Emotive, partisan and other subjective calls for Ministers to intervene and veto command decisions instituting reform also risk proper civil-control-of-the-military as established by the Constitution, the Defence Act and tested Westminster-system conventions” (*ADA website*).

Facts and Figures: There have been 41 combat deaths, 260 wounded, and over 500 veteran suicides, among Australian soldiers involved in Afghanistan.

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Quaker and Related Responses

The National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) – of which Quakers are members - has written to the Federal Government requesting a commitment for Afghan refugees by granting protection or citizenship to asylum seekers and refugees living in Australia or in immigration detention, matching the Canadian commitment to accept a further 20,000 Afghan refugees, and assisting Afghan Australians with urgent family reunion applications. The NCCA's peace agency Act for Peace is appealing for donations to assist its partners in Afghanistan help uprooted 50,000 families with food, shelter and vital health supplies. Contact <https://www.actforpeace.org.au/afghanistan>

British Quakers have appealed to their government to recognise its obligations and “expand safe and legal routes for migration and sanctuary to those who need it”. They said that lasting peace and security will require investment in peace-building and human development, rather than war and violence. Priorities should be given to human rights, dignity and wellbeing. In addressing the roots of violence. (*Paul Parker, Recording Clerk for Britain Yearly Meeting, 17 August 2021*).

Several Friends are working to get a group of 20-25 young people (mostly Hazara) from the Afghan Peace Volunteers out of danger in Afghanistan. A human rights lawyer is helping get them on a list to bring there to Australia. Sponsors are needed for each person. Sponsors need to be willing to help arrange accommodation and other support while the person establishes themselves. Funds are being raised for the costs involved. If you can offer to be a sponsor, contact Dale Hess (VRM) at d.hess@ozemail.com.au

The AYM Presiding Clerk, Ann Zubrick, has (with QPLC help) sent a letter to the Minister for Immigration, Alex Hawke MP, acknowledging the Federal Government's granting of safe haven visa to 300 Afghan nationals and family members. The letter asks that the Government:

- expand the safe haven visa program to include those Afghans who have supported our role in Afghanistan;
- offer more than 3000 humanitarian visas to Afghans seeking to come to Australia, closer to the larger numbers accepted from Syrian and Iraqi refugees in 2015;
- grant permanent residency to the 4,200 Afghan nationals, currently living in Australia on temporary protection visas, who are eligible, as soon as possible;
- asks a number of questions about how the Government plans to respond to the ongoing needs of Afghans who are currently in holding camps run by the International Organisation for Migration, and for assisting Afghans in Australia who have grave fears for their families back in Afghanistan.

In April 2021 the Presiding Clerk wrote to the Prime Minister seeking support for two initiatives relating to the alleged war crimes by Australian soldiers – (a) refer the Brereton report to an appropriate committee of the Parliament for public examination and response, and (b) extend the Resilient Agriculture and Livelihoods Initiative for Socio-Economic Development (REALISE) project supported by DFAT through Action Aid Afghanistan. There has so far been no reply to this approach, despite a reminder being sent recently. See www.bluemountainspermacultureinstitute.com.au

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Actions for Australian Quakers

Friends are encouraged to promote the Presiding Clerk's statement, make contact with Afghans in Australia to listen to their needs and respond as led. This could include supporting groups involved in helping Afghans seeking to reunite families and keep contact with those abroad. Members of Parliament can be asked what action they are willing to take to enhance Australia's response to the crisis. Contact the Afghan-Australian Parliamentary Friendship Group (formed in 2017) through Andrew Wallace MP (Member for Fisher in Qld).

Andrew.Wallace.MP@aph.gov.au

QPLC will welcome feedback about action taken or suggested to ensure that the people of Afghanistan are heard in the time ahead. QPLC will continue to monitor trends in the Middle East to keep Friends informed of changes in the balance of power and the potential for supporting peaceful outcomes for the people.

Canberra, August 2021

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