

the leisure to use their free will and to develop their own cognitive powers. The concerns of daily life would divert them too much from the search for the Hidden God. But if an assembly of wise men of the different religions could come together, then the solution would be “simple.”

Nicolaus’ solution is conceived from the standpoint of *coincidentia oppositorum* (the coincidence of opposites) “from above.” One fault would be, to fail to distinguish between the prophets and God Himself, and otherwise to mistake the traditions, to which one is accustomed, with the truth. In that God addresses the representatives of the religions, as wise men, He easily succeeds in convincing them, that there is only *one* wisdom and *one* truth.

The oldest of the participating representatives of the religions, a Greek, asks, how to bring together the diversity of religions, since they would hardly accept one new united religion, as they had defended their own with their blood. The Word of God answers, that they should not introduce any new religion, but that the true religion lies *before* all other religions. The peace bringing new unity of religion is not a synthetic, new belief, but rather what is reasonable to reason, as soon as reason becomes conscious of its premises. The Greek representative reacts enthusiastically over the “spirit of reason” (*spiritus rationalis*), who is “capable of wonderful arts” (*capax artium mirabilium*), from which comes human perfectability. If this spirit is oriented toward wisdom, he can approach her more and more. He will never reach absolute wisdom, but come closer and closer to her, and to him she will taste as an eternal food. The unity is then attainable, if all spirits are oriented toward wisdom and truth, and this truth is recognized as primary and basic.

The Cusan approach is therefore totally different from the modern pantheistic or phenomenological forms of ecumenical dialogue, in which the existence of the one knowable truth is denied, in favor of a democratic plurality of religious opinions. This dialogue can only have success, if all participants start from a view of man, which understands man as a “living image of God” (*imago viva Dei*) whose likeness to God consists in the fact that his potentially infinitely perfectable cognitive capabilities can always better understand the lawfulness of the order of creation, and with the application of this cognition, can improve the living standards of all men, and increase the population potential of the Earth.

Pope John Paul II has, after all, by his most recent journeys, stressed, that there is no alternative to such an ecumenical dialogue on the highest level.

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Six Million Afghans Threatened By War

by Mary Burdman

As the massive U.S. and British bombing of Afghanistan continued for the second week, the possibility that *many millions* of Afghani people will starve, and die of hunger, cold, and disease in the rapidly approaching Winter, becomes more real by the day. This catastrophe is not the immediate result of the relentless bombing campaign. Afghanistan has suffered 22 years of continuous warfare and one collapsing government after the other; it has been, during that time, reduced to one of the poorest nations in the world. The average life-span in Afghanistan is now just 40 years; a child born there is *25 times* more likely to die before it reaches age five than if it were born in the United States or Europe.

Afghanistan is a nation where 85% of the population depends upon agriculture to survive. In the past three years, the worst drought in living memory has destroyed grain and fruit production and animal husbandry: This year, in many areas, there was total crop failure. Overall, the harvest was 50% below normal. People have been sacrificing their herds, and have no future livelihood. Opium production and trafficking, and weapons trafficking to the opposing Taliban and Northern Alliance forces, are almost all that is left of economy in this country of 24 million people.

The looming catastrophe is no surprise. This past June, the United Nations World Food Program (WFP), warned that 5 million people in Afghanistan would soon face starvation. Crops dependent upon rainfall were failing, while the essential irrigation system — which dates back, in some areas, more than a thousand years — was collapsing. The country already had a grain shortfall of more than 2 million tons, and the herds of sheep, camels, and other livestock were also facing starvation.

The already-impoorished population was rapidly being reduced to destitution. Famine conditions were emerging all over the country, the WFP reported; millions of people could survive only if they got international aid. In Afghanistan, the WFP was already feeding 3.8 million people last Summer, twice as many as a year ago, and ever-more urgent efforts were necessary to get food into the country for the Winter. More and more people were fleeing their homes, to seek whatever food and shelter they could find, either in the cities, or across the borders. There were already some 1 million internal refugees in Afghanistan, and this number will rise again this Winter. Due to the years of warfare, there are already 2 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, and 1.4 million in Iran, all des-

FIGURE 1



perately in need of food and other aid.

Most urgent is the situation in drought-struck Faryab province, where 400,000 people could run out of food before the end of October, and many tens of thousands are already living on grass, which will poison them. By the end of the Winter, another 1.5-2 million people in Afghanistan will have no food at all. Some 500,000 of these people, living in remote areas, for the most part do not have the means, or the strength, to leave their homes and become refugees. If food does not get to them, there is little chance of their survival.

‘It May Already Be Too Late’

The international aid agencies, including the United Nations’ agencies, and such groups as Islamic Relief, Oxfam, and Christian Aid, are all now urgently calling for a halt to the bombing, to allow food convoys through. Whatever the limitations of UN and other agencies from a political standpoint, they do have years of experience in this region, and know of what they speak.

On Oct. 12, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Mary Robinson called for suspending the air strikes, to avert disaster. On Irish state radio, Robinson said, “The desperate urgency now is to use this window until about the 15th or 16th of November, when the Winter snows will prevent access, and the people will freeze and starve to death because they will have neither food nor shelter. We must have a pause in order to enable huge humanitarian access and to allow a number of Afghans to come across the borders.” Robinson said that the situation is “desperate” for 2 million Afghans.

In the following days, spokesmen for all the leading aid groups working in the region around Afghanistan echoed Robinson’s call. On Oct. 16, Anthony Morton-King, Emergencies Coordinator for Christian Aid, wrote to the London

Guardian newspaper, that “aid corridors must be established” in Afghanistan, if the food is to reach its destination in safety. However, he warned, conditions in Afghanistan are so bad, that “it may already be too late” to prevent mass deaths.

“Even if military action were to be put on pause tomorrow to allow aid into Afghanistan, non-governmental organizations would still need to step up their activities by almost 200 times if the impending humanitarian disaster is to be averted,” wrote Morton-King.

The WFP estimates that it is necessary to build up a stockpile of 250,000 metric tons of food in just the coming five weeks. This would require an enormous logistical effort, Morgon-King wrote, deploying 715 trucks per day to transport the food. On some days in the second week in October, only four trucks were arriving in Afghanistan.

Even without the bombing, the conditions in the country, especially of the roads, are so bad, that it is not likely such a level of truck transport can be achieved.

The WFP has said it would resort to an airlift and food drops, including in the snow, if all else fails. But if all of Afghanistan’s airports have been destroyed by bombing, this operation, already a “last choice,” would be extremely difficult.

The day before, Eric Laroche, an official with the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in Islamabad, Pakistan, warned that “as many as 100,000 more children will die inside Afghanistan this Winter, if aid does not reach them in sufficient quantities in the next few weeks. The reason I say ‘more’ is because almost 300,000 Afghan children already die each year, largely of preventable causes.” More than half the children in Afghanistan are already malnourished, he said.

Millions Of Lives At Stake

When U.S. President George Bush, on Sept. 20, confirmed that the United States was going to focus its entire “anti-terrorism” war against Osama bin Laden, thereby ignoring the real danger that rogue military and intelligence forces inside the United States had carried out the Sept. 11 attacks, the international aid agencies had to withdraw their non-Afghani staff. Enough internal staff and infrastructure remained, however, to provide some level of food distribution.

Food convoys, suspended in late September, were resumed during the second week of October, but not on any level which could meet the need. WFP director Catherine Bertini, warning that “millions of lives are at stake,” said that the military assault meant that the United Nations had to urgently re-shape its efforts, and get 52,000 metric tons of food into the country in the four weeks before mid-November.” Yet, this 52,000 tons is only 10% of the overall food aid which the WFP had already estimated would be needed in Afghanistan until the end of Winter, by March 31, 2002, she said.

The greatly increased pressure on Afghanistan, due to the bombings, means that during the Winter, at least 6 million

people will have to get food aid, and it is feared that an additional 1.5 million refugees will flee the war, and will need food. They will either gather on the now-closed borders with Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, or, as many are already doing, cross the borders illegally under extremely hazardous conditions, flooding the already-overstrained refugee camps.

The situation is made all the more difficult, by the conditions in surrounding nations. The devastating drought has also hit Iran and Tajikistan. Iranian wheat production this year was down by one-fifth due to drought, and Tajikistan, itself an extremely poor nation, will also urgently need food aid. Grain production was down 36% this year from five years ago, and 1 million people are facing famine in remote areas. In western Pakistan, where crop production is down 15-20%, the lack of water is causing unrest and tensions with neighboring nations, including Iran.

Afghanistan's Potential

This ancient nation, far from being a backwater, lies in one of the most strategic positions in Eurasia. For millennia, it was the crossroads between Central and East Asia and the Indian Subcontinent. It was the pathway for the exchange of Greek, Indian, Persian, Chinese, and Muslim cultures, which has shaped Eurasian history. It was also the route used by conquerors, from Genghis Khan to the British Empire — some

more successfully than others — between Central and South Asia. This is why Afghanistan, from the 1970s, became the base from which the U.S. Carter-Brzezinski Administration first launched the “mujahideen” operations, which precipitated the Soviet invasion, and, eventually, the rise of the Taliban scourge.

Yet this great historic crossroads, still has not one rail line. Many times, this problem could have been solved. In 1960, wrote British Prof. Arnold Toynbee during a tour of Afghanistan, the city of Kandahar was the busy site of road construction. The Soviets were building a road to their closest rail terminus, in Kushka, as well as a road from the Afghan bank of the Amu-Darya River, north via the Salang Tunnel. The Americans were also building a road, from Kandahar, to Chaman, the northwest terminus of the Pakistani rail system.

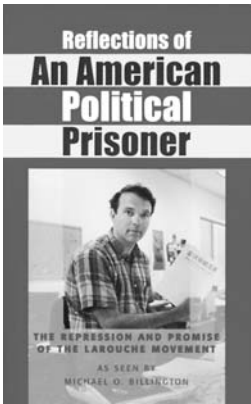
In 1978, as a former UN diplomat then stationed in Kabul has related, delegations from both France and China were visiting the city, with proposals for developing rail connections into Afghanistan. Their missions were brought to an abrupt stop, by the April coup against Afghan President Sardar Mohammed Daud. Then, in 1994, some circles in Pakistan were discussing building a railroad through western Afghanistan to Central Asia, but this was ditched in favor of the sudden launching of the Taliban to power — with support from the Pakistani ISI, Saudi Arabia, and the United States.

The terrible conditions in which Afghanistan has been forced to exist, must be changed. There must be great water projects in Central Asia, to begin to resolve the drought problem. Large water projects were being built in Afghanistan, often with U.S. assistance, in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Rail projects in Afghanistan and in the region, are essential. To get the urgently needed food to this threatened nation, all existing resources of the Eurasian rail system must be used. The UN WFP has developed a logistics plan, to bring food from as far as the Baltic, to Afghanistan. Supplies are being shipped from such ports as Riga, in Latvia, 4,000 kilometers over Russian and Kazakstan rail lines, to Tajikistan, where it has to be transferred to truck, or even donkey transport, to get into Afghanistan.

Food is also being sent from the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas — over rail lines, many of them just built in the last five years — via Mashad in Turkmenistan. From here, it can be taken to the Afghan border, or to Afghanistan's northern border, with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. If political conditions would allow, the city of Termez in Uzbekistan, site of an important bridge across the Amu-Darya River to Afghanistan, could also become an important food supply center. Termez used to be a key trade post with Afghanistan. The connection from Pakistan's port of Karachi, by rail to Zahedan in eastern Iran, is also a transport route to be used for the Afghan food crisis.

All of these, are central routes along the Eurasian Land-Bridge. Saving the people of Afghanistan is one immediate task of that project; saving the rest of the humanity, is the next.



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