

Picture : The Tolo TV news studio, Kabul, Afghanistan, October 18, 2015

The Taliban and al-Qaeda have killed more than fifty journalists in Afghanistan since 2001. But until this year, nobody had tried to massacre an entire busload of journalists in the center of Kabul, all working for the country's largest and most successful broadcaster. That changed on January 20, when a suicide bomber drove a car laden with explosives into a minibus taking forty journalists and staff of Tolo TV home after a day at the office.

At least seven people were killed including several women in their early twenties; some of the victims were burnt and scarred beyond recognition. Another twenty-six were injured, some so seriously that the death toll is expected to rise. It was easily the most deadly single attack against journalists ever made anywhere.

Such is the current level of lawlessness and insecurity in Afghanistan, four months after President Obama concluded that the continuing withdrawal of US troops was leading to chaos. Just today, another Taliban car bomb killed at least twenty police in front of a police building in the capital. Despite a remaining garrison of 9,000 US troops and advisors, American diplomats now travel only by helicopter for meetings, even inside Kabul. The Taliban control almost all the major roads in the country, which they can shut down when they choose, thereby isolating the major cities and preventing the supply of foodstuffs and trade from six neighboring states.

Notwithstanding the one trillion dollars spent in Afghanistan by American taxpayers since 2001, the fact is that Afghanistan is a country whose government has hardly any ability to enforce its writ, even in the capital itself. Corruption and warlordism have become an essential part of the system and the population has gradually lost faith in its leadership. And as security continues to deteriorate, Afghans now make up the second largest contingent of asylum-seekers arriving in Europe, their numbers surpassed only by those fleeing Syria. According to UN statistics, they constitute almost 15 percent of the 650,000 refugees who reached Europe between January and August. Many of them come from well-educated, middle-class backgrounds and had good jobs in Afghanistan when there was still a large presence of foreign forces in the country.

Amid this collapse of the rule of law, Tolo TV has been one of the few bright spots. The network has built up an amazing reputation for reporting the news as it is and presenting the country's problems as they unfold. It is also intensely creative, translating programs such as *American Idol* into the hugely popular *Afghan Idol*, and launching the country's first league soccer teams. Tolo's soap operas are watched around the region. Tolo is less a TV station than a national institution in a country that has few others.

But this reputation has come at a steep price. Last year the Taliban threatened Tolo after they accused it of misreporting atrocities carried out in Kunduz when the northern city briefly fell under Taliban control. There was a direct threat against Tolo CEO Saad Mohseni and his three brothers, who help run Tolo. Staff members and prominent TV anchors also received threats.

The Taliban were brazen in justifying the January 20 massacre. Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid wrote on his Twitter account,

The attack was staged to revenge Tolo TV's enmity with Islam, its insult to Afghan culture, its humiliation of Kunduz residents and its false accusations against Mujahidin. Thanks to Almighty God and his support...the attack was successful. The vehicle was destroyed and swallowed by fire with all its spies and its corrupt passengers killed. Bombing soft targets has become one of the Taliban's ways of waging war with the Afghan state, just as ISIS has begun to attack tourist areas and soft targets in the Middle East and Europe. Add to this a fair amount of Taliban paranoia, and young graphic designers, documentary makers, editors, and reporters—all the noisy, talented, dedicated, and keen young people who make up any newsroom—were deemed to be spies.

Tolo CEO Saad Mohseni, speaking to me from Kabul as he traveled from one funeral to the next for his dead colleagues, described them as "the best and the brightest of our younger generation." He said there would be "no let up in Tolo's honest covering of the news despite the losses" and that "we have been stunned by the support we have received from around the country by ordinary people—everyone has felt a personal loss when they heard the news of the killing of our colleagues."

The real tragedy is that after receiving threats last year, Tolo had been promised by the national unity government of President Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah that special security measures would be given to Tolo to protect its transport, its buildings, and its studios. Tolo asked for armed police escorts, armored vehicles, and enhanced security, but nothing happened. There were no special precautions taken by the security forces before the suicide driver struck.

This is Afghanistan today. Barely a year after the bulk of US forces pulled out, the Taliban are trying to capture the southern province of Helmand, which is also one of their base areas. The fight is desperate and the government response from Kabul has been pathetic. It's not surprising that people believe Tolo more than they do the government.

Forgotten by the West, Afghanistan is facing a multidimensional civil war with the Afghan Taliban, which is being aided now by a plethora of groups such as al-Qaeda, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Chechens, and Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Tayyaba. On January 28, Lt. General John Nicholson Jr., President Barack Obama's choice to become the new commander of US forces in Afghanistan, agreed with members of the Senate Armed Services Committee who

described the security situation in Afghanistan as “deteriorating.” If he is confirmed, among Nicholson’s first tasks will be to determine whether the counter-terrorism abilities of current US forces stationed in the country are adequate and to ensure that the Taliban does not take Kandahar, the group’s traditional homeland in the south of the country. Following the Taliban’s cutting of the electricity supply from Tajikistan to Kabul, [battles erupted](#) in late January between the group and Afghan troops in Baghlan province, about 140 miles north of Kabul. In at least two provinces bordering Pakistan (Nangarhar and Zabul) the Taliban are also fighting ISIS, which is trying to recruit among dissatisfied Taliban members. Not until the end of January were US Special Forces in Afghanistan given authorization to go after ISIS fighters in the country—one reflection of how lackadaisically the Pentagon is responding to the crisis there. US forces can now pursue ISIS fighters, who have been declared a threat to the US. One may well ask, What about the threat that the Afghan government has already faced from ISIS all these months as the group has built up its base areas?

From afar, it may seem good that the extremists are fighting among themselves. But the record of violence in recent months has shown again and again that in such a conflict innocent civilians—bystanders, children, people who are at the wrong place at the wrong time—are the main victims. There are no victories to be had.

The Kabul government is swiftly becoming discredited, even in the eyes of its backers. It has failed to carry out the structural and constitutional reforms promised to international donors, failed to deal with the economic crisis that was clear to everyone once the Western forces withdrew, and failed to rally the army. Western officers and even Ghani’s own advisors acknowledge that the Afghan military is precarious. Dozens of generals who were sacked by Ghani have not been replaced and there is still no minister of defense. Ghani has carried out similar purges in the bureaucracy, police, and governorships of provinces—often sacking people but not replacing them, leaving a huge vacuum.

Morale is so low among officials and the presidency so deaf to appeals from the provinces that governors and officials have resorted to tweeting or putting up messages on Facebook to alert the government that they are surrounded by Taliban and their town or post is about to fall. Mohammad Jan Rasooly, the deputy governor of Helmand, put up one such [Facebook message](#) saying soldiers defending Sangin—a town in Helmand—was desperately short of food and ammunition and surrounded by Taliban. They needed help. The statement [drew wide attention](#), but Ghani sacked him anyway for insubordination.

Meanwhile in Kabul, the opposition is becoming stronger, new anti-Ghani factions are emerging, and a political crisis is widely anticipated. Many politicians say constitutional changes are urgently needed in order to prevent the disintegration of the country, or a coup by one or more warlords or a section of the army. Some Afghan intellectuals and politicians are urging President Ghani to call an emergency *loya jirga*—a traditional national meeting of representatives of society, particularly tribal leaders, that would choose an interim coalition government, with a fresh election to follow.

The *loya jirga* would introduce constitutional amendments to make the country a parliamentary democracy—something that the non-Pashtun groups and many urban Afghans have been demanding since 2001. These reforms could be coupled with a renewed attempt to bring the Taliban into talks or even encourage them to take part in the *loya jirga* debate. Until now, Ghani has resisted such a move, but with the Tolo TV massacre, public patience is running out.

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