

Afghan justice a dilemma

Eye-for-eye revenge too much for Western stomachs

By PETER WORTHINGTON

Last Updated: 28th November 2008, 3:40am

The 15 Afghan schoolgirls who had acid thrown or squirted into their faces pose a thorny question for the Canadian government, as well as for the UN and European Union.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai wants the 10 alleged perpetrators hanged -- all supposedly militant Taliban supporters who oppose women being educated.

Even though the accused have reportedly confessed, one must remember that this is Afghanistan, where justice and law differ from our concepts. One can never be sure.

The girls and a teacher who were attacked, as well as the majority of non-Taliban Afghans, also want the perpetrators killed -- but not before they, too, have been tortured, and their faces doused in acid.

That's a bit strong for stomachs that aren't Afghan.

While the death penalty is in the Afghan constitution, Canada and other countries that oppose the death penalty are reduced to looking the other way, or pretending ignorance when death is imposed.

Death by torture, or revenge killings on an eye-for-eye, tooth-by-tooth basis -- which acid poured on these guys would be -- is a different matter. Canada gets confused on this issue. We not only don't sanction it for our troops, we even want to interfere when Afghans treat prisoners roughly.

Some in Canada, who should know better, even think we should not turn over Taliban prisoners to the Afghans for fear they will be treated too roughly. There's a world of difference between rough treatment and torture, and even in what the definition of "torture" is. We want none of it.

The problem for Canada and Western allies in Afghanistan is that we supposedly are trying to help restore (or introduce, because there's not much to "restore") peace and security, without taking over.

We are aiding the existing elected government, not giving orders.

President Karzai, seen by many of his countrymen as weak, has recently become more hawkish, ordering a variety of militant offenders and criminals hanged. Afghans approve, especially when it comes to the Taliban.

The Taliban, when they were in charge, opposed women going to school, having jobs, having flesh showing, being exposed to sunlight as well as the prying eyes of strangers.

The Taliban relished public executions, like stoning offending women to death. To average Afghans, the renewed surge of Taliban activity coming in from Pakistan, is attributed to Karzai and allies like Canada not killing them fast enough.

One of the key issues of Afghanistan today is enabling girls to attend school. It's dicey, because again, we are reluctant to interfere with existing cultural mores that dictate otherwise.

An example of the first Canadian soldiers in Kandahar might be instructive to today's aid and social workers. The first wave of Princess Pats to reach Kandahar in 2002 were struck by the sorry plight of local villages.

On his own, Capt. Alex Watson sized up the situation and got his troops to start building schools and digging wells for villagers, who were delighted. As an aside, CIDA apparently agreed to provide financing -- which never materialized. That custom continued.

When Watson learned that only boys were going to be allowed to attend school, he argued with villagers who wouldn't budge. So Watson announced he and his troops would stop construction -- no girls allowed, no school built. The villagers quickly capitulated and today, presumably, the co-ed school functions normally.

That's the effect of the Taliban, and one example how to combat it.

Afghans, of course, criticize ours and other troops for not killing Taliban fighters in sufficient numbers. And maybe they are right. It's their country and they know what works better than we outsiders do.

Copyright © 2008 Toronto Sun All Rights Reserved