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The tragic US strategy in Afghanistan

By **ERIC STONER**

Albert Einstein famously defined insanity as "doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." If that doesn't accurately describe the more than nine-year-old U.S. war in Afghanistan, I don't know what does.

The results of the surge of tens of thousands of additional troops into the "graveyard of empires" are now evident. More soldiers, humanitarian workers, and civilians were killed in 2010 than any year since the United States invaded. One tally put the dead at more than 10,000 last year alone.

At least 120,000 Afghans have also been driven from their homes due to the violence over the last year and a half. I visited Charahi Qambar in December, the largest of some 30 camps for the internally displaced around Kabul, and was horrified by the living conditions there. These refugees call simple mud huts home and lack adequate access to food, clean water, education, or work. The most vulnerable, especially the children, often die from the cold during the bitter winters.

Meanwhile, with the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan serving as one of its most effective recruiting tools, the Taliban has grown exponentially--from an estimated 7,000 in

2006 to 35,000 or 40,000 today, according to NATO.

But after the release of the December review of the war, President Obama nonetheless declared that the United States is "on track to achieve our goals." Either the administration has deluded itself or it can't muster the courage to tell the American public the truth.

The entire city of Kabul, which the National Intelligence Estimates said is one of the few "ink spots" where there is relative security, feels like a prison. On almost every block there is at least one Afghan in camouflage with an AK-47. Concrete blast walls, sand bags, and razor wire are everywhere. I was frisked for weapons not only at the airport, but also at a nice restaurant. Despite all of these efforts, Kabul is far from safe. This was made painfully clear during my trip when suicide bombers attacked a bus, killing five Afghan army officers and wounding nine in the first major attack in the capital since May.

Unfortunately, violence is only one of many threats faced by the Afghan people. A perpetual cloud of dust and smog engulfs Kabul, which Afghan authorities say kills 3,000 people in the city every year. The country is plagued by corruption, which the United States too often supports, and desperate poverty.

If the Obama administration is truly concerned

with rooting out the Taliban and undermining terrorism, it must rethink its goals in Afghanistan and dramatically change gears. Rather than pointing to an ever-higher Taliban body count as a sign of success, the U.S. should stop backing the corrupt warlords that currently dominate the Afghan government, remove its troops from the country, and redirect the more than \$2 billion per week that is currently being squandered on the war to meet the basic needs of everyday Afghans. Only when the people of Afghanistan are free from foreign occupation and have a functioning, democratic government--along with real hope for a better life--will the lure of the Taliban and extremism disappear.

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