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Arab spring's danger signs

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Nation-building on hostile soil can be lethal.

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IT IS heartbreaking to see photographs of Lance-Cpl Luke Gavin with the wife and three small children he left behind, when he was killed while serving in Afghanistan on the weekend.

Just 29 years old, Gavin, Capt Bryce Duffy, 26 and Cpl Ashley Birt, 22, were shot dead by a rogue Afghan soldier, in our worst wartime loss in a single day since Vietnam. But it is a story that no longer dominates the news -- the grounding of Qantas overshadowed the tragedy on a far-off battlefield.

Ten years after Operation Slipper commenced, for all the blood and treasure expended, Afghanistan is still a nightmare. The supply trucks keep snaking their way across the border with Pakistan and the influence of that shadowy neighbour grows.

Australia had reason to join its American ally in a mission to clean out an al-Qaida haven, since more than 100 of our citizens have been killed by terrorists who have trained in Afghanistan.

But the expected withdrawal of US troops by 2013-2014 couldn't come soon enough, and Australia will bow out with honour and relief.

Afghanistan was supposed to be the "virtuous" war, a policing action that US President Barack Obama and Foreign

Affairs Minister Kevin Rudd championed to assert their latter-day opposition to the Iraq invasion and moral superiority to their predecessors.

Obama used Afghanistan to rebuff the Bush administration for taking its eye off the ball, but nation-building in such hostile terrain would never succeed.

The NATO intervention in Libya was another "virtuous war", humanitarian regime change pursued by Obama and Rudd. It was urged on by none other than Greens leader Bob Brown. But beware a war supported by the Left.

In Libya on Tuesday came pictures of the black flag of al-Qaida flying above the courthouse in Benghazi.

As NATO formally ended the military campaign that ousted Muammar Gaddafi, the Libyan interim government imposed Shariah law and re-installed polygamy.

Gaddafi warned of al-Qaida's role among the agitators destabilising his country, but the West scoffed. The revolting manner of his death, which included a rebel apparently sodomising him with a knife, and the defiling of his body afterwards, makes you question the character of the people NATO was supporting. In Afghanistan they would be the enemy.

An Amnesty report in June cast doubt on many of the horror stories out of Libya which were used to justify the NATO intervention, of mass rape and human rights abuses by Gaddafi loyalists.

Amnesty found little evidence to support the stories and in many cases found they were inventions of the rebels in Benghazi, designed to inflame Western sentiment against Gaddafi. The ploy worked as hundreds of citizen journalist freelancers armed with cheap cameras flooded into the country to make a name for themselves.

Gaddafi was a brutal dictator who promoted terrorism abroad, but are we really better off with him gone? We seem to have been helping our enemies gain a foothold in the Middle East, as the so-called Arab spring turns ugly, and Islamists gain more power.

Syria is the next target for regime change. Yet Australian priest and scholar Paul Stenhouse, recently returned from a visit there, warns of the consequences of destabilising the Assad regime, imperfect though it is. The Catholic charity that he chairs in Australia, Aid to the Church In Need, has compiled figures for its annual publication, Persecuted and Forgotten, which shows the catastrophe for Christians and other minorities across the Middle East of what is now being called the "Arab winter".

In Egypt, Coptic Christians, who comprise more than 10 per cent of the population, are being slaughtered and their churches burned. Last month a Coptic website reported that a 17-year-old Christian student was murdered by his classmates for wearing a crucifix.

In Tunisia, Catholic priests are being murdered, there are riots outside synagogues and demonstrations to reinstate the hijab.

"The momentum in countries affected by the Arab spring has, in most cases, shifted from youthful demonstrators and idealistic liberals to the military, security forces, and armed militias allied with Islamist and Salafist groups," says Stenhouse, editor of Annals magazine.

Whatever is the outcome of the Arab spring, it is clear that the 16.5 million Christians and other minorities in the Middle East will bear the brunt of the suffering. Some will try to make their way to Australia as refugees.

If we ever get control of our borders again, these are the people of greatest need who surely should be given priority in our humanitarian programs.

As a predominantly Christian country, you could say it is our duty actively to discriminate towards Christian refugees.

Unfortunately, persecuted Christians get no special treatment, and may even have a harder time getting visas at some Australian posts in Muslim countries. For instance, at the height of Coptic persecutions last year in Cairo, of 17,236 applications just 345 visas were granted. That's a 98 per cent failure rate.

By contrast, in Nairobi, 1312 visas were granted from 3800 applications. That means more than one in three were successful. Take the Coptic Christian family who had converted from Islam but were denied a refugee visa by

Australian authorities in Cairo two years ago.

Egyptian converts Maher El-Gohary, 56, and his daughter Dina, 15, were forced into hiding after being identified as apostates. As David Day writes in Annals this month, Muslim fanatics attacked Maher with a knife and threw acid at Dina before friends in Sydney helped them lodge an offshore refugee application in 2009. But last year their application was rejected, without recourse, for lack of "compelling reasons". They have since been accepted by France.

As Day writes: "When it comes to refugees, Australia is rightly proud of its reputation as one of the world's most generous nations. But it is a curious generosity that sometimes seems deliberately intent on benefiting the most importunate (pushy) rather than the most deserving."

Opposition immigration spokesman Scott Morrison says he has no plans to introduce special treatment for Christians. But the Opposition will review operations of "frontline staff in sensitive posts", such as Cairo, Amman and Beirut.

In the past, when there were complaints of bias in Cairo, applications would be quietly processed in Athens.

"There is no doubt that, particularly throughout the Middle East, there is a significant need (and) we'd be looking at taking at least 100 Copts who are facing persecution."

These are the deserving people in the queue we are told doesn't exist who are being rejected in favour of people who arrive by boat without papers, and with stories of hardship impossible to verify.

Last year, 2700 visas were granted to unauthorised boat arrivals.

That's what you call a pull factor, and it's luring people to their deaths.

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