

US war crime in Afghanistan: Hundreds of prisoners of war slaughtered at Mazar-i-Sharif

WSWS Editorial Board
27 November 2001

The killing of as many as 800 captured Taliban prisoners Sunday in Mazar-i-Sharif is a war crime for which the American government and military, right up to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and President Bush, are politically responsible. This massacre reveals the real nature of the US attack on Afghanistan. The terrorist attacks of September 11 are but a pretext for a colonial-style war of pillage and mass murder.

In both the savage methods used, and the lies employed to cover up the crime, the butchery at the Qala-i-Janghi fortress recalls the atrocities of the Vietnam War period: the My Lai massacre, the murder of 20,000 Vietnamese in the Phoenix assassination program, the saturation bombing and aerial defoliation with chemical poisons like Agent Orange, the obliteration of the town of Ben Suc, where an American officer declared it was necessary “to destroy the village in order to save it.”

According to both press and US government accounts, US Special Forces and CIA personnel were on the spot in Mazar-i-Sharif, calling in air strikes by helicopter gunships and fighter-bombers and directing the actions of Northern Alliance soldiers as they shot down hundreds of prisoners. German television broadcast footage of Northern Alliance soldiers shooting down from the walls of the fortress-prison into a mass of prisoners below.

Most of those killed, however, were annihilated by US air strikes. Warplanes dropped bombs on the fort and AC-130 helicopter gunships, which can fire 1,800 rounds a minute, were called in by Special Forces spotters in the fortress. Tanks and 2,000 Northern Alliance ground troops were also brought in to complete the destructive work. Throughout the one-sided battle, according to *Time* journalist Alex Perry, who was on the scene, the 40 or so American Special Forces and British SAS operatives were “running the show,” directing both the air and ground operations.

The barbarous character of the repression was calculated, as indicated by the comments of Northern Alliance spokesmen on Monday. “They were all killed and very few arrested,” said Zaher Wahadat, who confirmed that as many as 800 may have died. Alim Razim, an adviser to Gen. Rashid Dostum, the regional warlord, said that any prisoners still alive wouldn’t be alive for long. “Those who are left over will be dead,” he said. “None of them can escape.”

Northern Alliance and Pentagon officials claimed that the Taliban prisoners had smuggled weapons into the prison under their tunics, then opened fire on the guards and sought to make their escape. But journalists inside the prison at the time said that the prisoners had begun the rebellion by overpowering several guards and seizing their weapons.

It is not even clear that any organized rebellion actually took place. As the British newspaper the *Guardian* observed, “‘Shot while trying to escape’ is, after all, one of the oldest fibs in the book.” Northern Alliance troops may simply have opened fire on the prisoners, provoking a revolt in self-defense.

The anti-Taliban grouping has a long record of human rights violations, especially at Mazar-i-Sharif, the scene of massacres by both sides during the decade-long civil war in Afghanistan. The International Committee of the Red Cross reported last week that it had found 400 to 600 bodies in Mazar-i-Sharif, apparent victims of summary execution after the Northern Alliance captured the city on November 9.

By Alex Perry’s account, the revolt began when the prisoners, Islamic fundamentalists from Pakistan, Chechnya and various Arab countries, encountered a journalist who began to question them. “Actually, I think it was probably the British journalist,” he wrote on *Time*’s web site. “It’s merely the sight of a Western face. They’re here to fight a jihad; they see a Western face; they assume that’s who they’ve come to get.”

The prisoners had ample reason to react to the presence of Western personnel in the prison. American CIA interrogators were in the facility to sort out the prisoners, separating from the rank-and-file Taliban volunteers the alleged Al Qaeda leaders, who would be subjected to more intensive interrogation, i.e., torture, followed by execution.

The Taliban prisoners unexpectedly surrendered Sunday in the besieged city of Kunduz. They gave themselves up to General Dostum, whose Uzbek-based force was approaching Kunduz from the west, rather than to General Khan Daoud, the head of the largely Tajik force attacking from the east, possibly because Dostum gave them assurances that they would be repatriated to Pakistan.

There were press reports over the weekend that Dostum had made such a deal, and he was denounced by rival Northern Alliance commanders who wanted the so-called “foreign Taliban” to be placed on trial in Islamic courts or killed on the spot. It is quite likely that the appearance of the Americans at Qala-i-Janghi was the first indication to the Taliban prisoners that they had been double-crossed, and they reacted accordingly.

A massacre on Rumsfeld’s orders

If the exact chain of events that led up to the slaughter at Qala-i-Janghi is still uncertain, the moral and political responsibility for the bloodbath is not. In the days leading up to the massacre, officials of the UN and humanitarian organizations were warning of an impending bloodbath. US officials, on the contrary, made it clear that they wanted as many of the foreign Taliban killed as possible. Their repeated public statements were undoubtedly accompanied by even more bloodthirsty private directives to the Northern Alliance leaders, who hardly needed any encouragement.

There is far stronger evidence that the US government ordered the massacre at Mazar-i-Sharif than any proof that has been produced to

substantiate the charge that Osama bin Laden ordered the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. The chronology is as follows:

November 19: Northern Alliance General Khan Daoud suggested that he would be willing to grant foreign Taliban fighters safe passage out of Afghanistan if they would surrender Kunduz, and was negotiating with the Taliban on this proposal.

November 20: US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld vetoed this proposal, declaring, "It would be most unfortunate if the foreigners in Afghanistan—the Al Qaeda and the Chechens and others who have been there working with the Taliban—if those folks were set free and in any way allowed to go to another country and cause the same kind of terrorist acts." Rumsfeld was repeatedly quoted in subsequent days to the effect that all foreign Taliban should be killed or imprisoned.

November 20: The official spokesman for the US and British forces attacking Afghanistan, Kenton Keith, said the US opposed any negotiated settlement at Kunduz, declaring, "As far as we're concerned, the only option is surrender." In a thinly disguised justification for the coming massacre, he claimed, "The coalition has used its best persuasive effort to urge upon the commanders of the Northern Alliance restraint and proper treatment of prisoners," but, he added, "We are not in a position to guarantee anything."

November 21: Rumsfeld, in an interview with the CBS program "60 Minutes II," said he would prefer that Osama bin Laden be killed rather than taken alive. "You bet your life," he said.

November 22: Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf met with British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw in Islamabad, calling for UN intervention to avert a bloodbath. Straw and UN officials issued verbal appeals for both sides to observe "the laws of war", which include the prohibition against killing of prisoners.

November 23: The *New York Times* cited statements by "a senior Pentagon official" opposing any release of captured foreign Taliban fighters. "What we care about is that Al Qaeda and Taliban are not capable of continuing to do what they've been doing," the official said.

November 23: The *Washington Post* reported widespread concern in the Middle Eastern press that Rumsfeld's comments amounted to "a 'green light' from the United States to kill so-called Afghan Arabs." One commentator wrote that the Northern Alliance was being "encouraged and incited by the Americans" to wreak vengeance on captured Taliban prisoners.

November 24: The *Times* cited statements by "an American official" that the US Central Command wanted to interrogate non-Afghans taken prisoner at Kunduz and other locations, to gather intelligence on Al Qaeda. "It's safe to say that CentCom is involved in a lot of aspects, including what they might do if scores of prisoners come out," said the official, referring to the Central Command. "But we're looking for as limited a role as possible, with as much access to the prisoners as we can." This last report indicates that top US military officers were closely monitoring the treatment of the Taliban prisoners. The events in Mazar-i-Sharif did not take them unawares.

The role of the media

The response by the American government and media to Sunday's bloodbath in Afghanistan has been brazen lying and defense of mass murder in a manner that recalls the worst crimes of Nazism.

US military spokesman Kenton Keith denied Monday that Alliance troops had carried out a massacre, saying the "status" of the prisoners as POWs covered by the Geneva Convention had changed once they

"engaged in offensive action" (i.e., once they resisted their own execution).

While press reports have described the beating to death of Taliban prisoners in Kunduz, in addition to the Qala-i-Janghi slaughter, Keith claimed that Northern Alliance troops "have been behaving with restraint. We do not know of any atrocities as part of any widespread pattern."

This version of events has gone virtually unchallenged in the American press. At Bush's latest press conference, on Monday morning, the day after the slaughter, there was not a single question on the prison massacre. At Rumsfeld's press conference later the same day, the question came up only tangentially, and no reporter pursued the issue.

One expression of the cynicism in the American press came four days before the massacre, when the *Washington Post* published a lengthy front-page review of the military situation. The *Post* likened American actions in Afghanistan to the US role in the civil war in El Salvador in the 1980s, when "US Special Forces advisers worked with local forces on the ground to hunt down and kill Marxist guerrillas."

The comparison of Afghanistan to El Salvador, made with evident approval, is perhaps unintentionally instructive, confirming that the US intervention in Central Asia has nothing to do with defending "human rights" and little to do with fighting terrorism. The US counterinsurgency campaign in El Salvador was one of the great crimes of the 20th century. At least 50,000 people were murdered by US-backed death squads. Among the best known victims of these fascist terrorists were the Catholic Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, and four American Maryknoll nuns.

As for the *New York Times*, its own report on the Mazar-i-Sharif killings not only suggested that the Taliban victims were to blame for their own deaths, but justified future massacres in advance. The *Times* wrote: "The incident seems certain to deepen the distrust the Northern Alliance feels as it takes control of hundreds, and potentially thousands, of Taliban soldiers."

The American media functions as a direct and willing instrument of the government's campaign of military aggression and political provocation. The television networks and daily newspapers are prepared to cover up and justify any crime committed by US forces anywhere in the world.

Who are the terrorists?

Outside the United States, even some leading establishment newspapers have been compelled to take note of the bloodstained character of the American intervention in Afghanistan. The British-based *Guardian* published a column November 26 by Brian Whitaker that raised the question of whether Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was guilty of war crimes.

Whitaker compared the slaughter of Afghan prisoners to another imperialist atrocity, the massacre of Palestinian refugees at the Sabra and Shatila camps in September 1982, when Lebanese fascist militia entered the camps under the protection of Israeli forces and murdered more than 1,000 men, women and children.

Whitaker wrote: "The link between Sabra/Shatila and many of the killings in Afghanistan is that both are examples of 'green light' warfare, where the main protagonists try to escape responsibility by allowing surrogates to do the unspeakable (and politically unacceptable) dirty work while providing discreet encouragement and assistance."

Ariel Sharon, Israeli defense minister at the time of Sabra and Shatila, was the subject of a parliamentary inquiry and ultimately forced to resign. Several European countries have sought to bring war crimes charges against Sharon, now Israeli Prime Minister, over the 1982 events.

Whitaker writes: “Whether the American defence secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, will face a similar inquiry remains to be seen, but his recent statements have given the green light for a killing spree. Of the non-Afghan fighters in Afghanistan, he said: ‘My hope is that they will either be killed or taken prisoner.’ It does not appear to matter which.”

Even while using stooge UN tribunals to prosecute particular enemies like former Yugoslav President Milosevic, the US government has intransigently opposed the establishment an International Criminal Court with jurisdiction over war crimes committed by the government officials of any nation. This is not simply the defense of US sovereignty as a point of abstract doctrine. The top officials of the US government are engaged, day by day, in planning, authorizing and executing actions which, by any objective standard, would put them in the dock as war criminals like Hitler, Göring and Goebbels.

The suicide hijackings that killed nearly 4,000 people at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were a monstrous crime, although the US government has failed to provide any significant evidence of the direct responsibility of Osama bin Laden, let alone the Taliban regime. The September 11 attacks, however, in no way justify the crimes being committed by American imperialism against the people of Afghanistan, and the new crimes already being planned in the Pentagon and CIA against other nations in the Middle East, Central Asia and elsewhere.

After the events at Qala-i-Janghi, it is preposterous to claim that the American intervention in Afghanistan has as its purpose the defense of human rights, or the punishment of terrorists. The US government, with its vast military arsenal and ruthless determination to work its will by force, is the world’s biggest terrorist.

It is the responsibility of the working people, both internationally and within the United States, to build an independent political mass movement to put an end to the imperialist war machine and the profit system that it defends.



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