

US atrocity against Taliban POWs: Whatever happened to the Geneva Convention?

Jerry White**28 November 2001**

Despite the silence in the American media and the lies from Bush administration officials, there is growing international outrage over the systematic massacre of hundreds of Taliban prisoners of war in Mazar-i-Sharif on Sunday and Monday. This act of mass murder was carried out by US warplanes and helicopter gunships, directed by US Special Forces and CIA personnel, and backed by several thousand soldiers of the Northern Alliance. As many as 800 prisoners were killed at the Qala-i-Janghi fortress.

The government of Pakistan, under intense public pressure because hundreds of Pakistani volunteers were among the Taliban troops taken prisoner, strongly condemned the prison massacre and declared that it contravened UN Security Council resolutions urging respect for the Geneva Convention. President Pervez Musharraf, the military strongman who seized power in Pakistan two years ago, has backed the US military onslaught against his former allies in the Taliban, and US forces used Pakistani bases as part of the campaign against the prisoners in Mazar-i-Sharif.

A columnist in the Pakistani newspaper *The Nation* declared that the killings at Mazar-i-Sharif “can only be quantified as a conspiracy and premeditated genocide.” Rejecting the claims that the prisoners caused their own deaths by engaging in a suicidal uprising, he wrote, “it is most unlikely that only recently surrendered captives would rise in sudden and open revolt against their captors—unless their very lives were at stake.”

No matter how US officials try to gloss over what happened, there could be no justification, even from a military standpoint, for the wanton slaughter of hundreds of captured soldiers. News accounts acknowledge the 19th century fortress was encircled by thousands of heavily armed Northern Alliance troops, as well as US and British special forces, whose base is located at a military airport just outside of the fort.

Even if some prisoners had seized their guards’ weapons, as US officials and the media claim, they did not have the manpower or ammunition to hold out against the tanks, jets and the superior ground forces arrayed against them. The only proper designation for the action taken by the US military is a premeditated war crime.

What was done in Mazar-i-Sharif was entirely in line with the

policies advocated by top US officials, including Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who has repeatedly said that he favors the killing of Taliban soldiers, especially those from outside of Afghanistan, rather than their capture and imprisonment.

Almost as sickening as the massacre itself is the universal silence on the part of the American media, including the so-called liberal press, about the cold-blooded murder of Taliban prisoners. Not a single US newspaper or media outlet—many of which had reporters on the scene who know exactly what happened—has raised any serious questions about the action.

Demonstrating contempt for the lives of hundreds of Afghan and foreign prisoners killed by bombs and bullets, the US news media focused its attention on half a dozen American military and CIA personnel hit by friendly fire when US warplanes bombed the compound. While CNN broadcast pictures of dozens of mutilated corpses strewn around the inside of the prison, as well as earlier scenes of Northern Alliance and US and British forces firing over the walls of the compound at prisoners, there was much more media interest in the possible death of one CIA interrogator. One could only imagine how the US media would have reported the killing of Northern Alliance prisoners by Taliban troops if the sides had been reversed.

The two leading US daily newspapers offered radically different explanations of the massacre. The *New York Times* quoted a Red Cross official claiming “the prisoners started the fight” and that the Northern Alliance troops had not sought to attack them. It cited the controlling role of American Special Forces and CIA personnel, who “took over the operation,” as though this guaranteed that no extrajudicial killings could have taken place.

The *Washington Post*, on the other hand, essentially admitted that the prisoners were murdered, but attributed the killings to the Northern Alliance: “A precise death toll could not be determined, but the apparently large number of Taliban deaths, compared to the reported killing of about 40 Northern Alliance fighters, raised questions here about the whether the violence was less an uprising than a massacre orchestrated by alliance troops,” the *Post* wrote Tuesday.

These accounts are diametrically opposite presentations of the facts, but they serve an identical political purpose: to deny that

the US forces were responsible for a monstrous war crime. This perfectly expresses the role of the American media, which takes as its starting point, not providing objective information to the American people, but justifying, through every manner of lie and distortion, the actions of the American government.

A few important facts did make their way into the *Times* account, however. The newspaper reports that the presence of CIA interrogators in the prison yard seemed to be the spark to the rebellion:

“By midmorning, some prisoners were being interviewed by the chief of intelligence for the area from the Northern Alliance, Said Kamal, together with two C.I.A. operatives, alliance officials said.

“The presence of the Americans may have caused anger or desperation among some of the foreign Taliban, who may be part of Osama bin Laden’s Al Qaeda network or who fear extradition to their home countries.

“One group of Northern Alliance fighters who were inside the compound at the time said the sight of the C.I.A. officials led to the revolt.”

And the *Times* further notes that the rebellion began while the prisoners were being searched on Sunday morning: “About 250 prisoners had been checked, and their arms were tied, said foreign journalists who had been allowed to witness the scene.” This strongly suggests that many of those who died—600 to 800 Taliban compared to only a few dozen Northern Alliance troops—were killed while they were bound and unable to defend themselves.

It is particularly noteworthy that no one in the media or liberal establishment has raised the obvious violation of international law concerning the treatment of prisoners of war, including the Geneva Convention of 1949, on the part of both the Northern Alliance and the American forces.

Article 3 of the Convention states that “members of the armed forces who have laid down their arms ... shall in all circumstances be treated humanely, without any adverse distinction founded on race, color, religion or faith ... or any other similar criteria.”

This article was flagrantly violated by the Northern Alliance forces at the surrender of the Taliban troops in the besieged city of Kunduz. Several thousand Afghan Taliban were immediately paroled upon surrender, and either incorporated into the ranks of the Northern Alliance or allowed to return to their home villages. The foreign-born Taliban, however, were either killed singly, in acts of individual murder, or rounded up in large groups and trucked away for subsequent interrogation, torture and execution.

During the week-long siege of Kunduz, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made repeated statements calling for the killing or imprisonment of all captured foreign Taliban—in other words, he demanded that the Northern Alliance systematically violate the Geneva Convention.

The Convention specifically prohibits “violence to life and

person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture” and the “passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court affording all the judicial guarantees which are recognized as indispensable by civilized peoples.”

The torture of POWs is specifically prohibited in Article 17, which states: “No physical or mental torture, nor any other form of coercion, may be inflicted on prisoners of war to secure from them information of any kind whatever. Prisoners of war who refuse to answer may not be threatened, insulted, or exposed to unpleasant or disadvantageous treatment of any kind.”

Finally, of particular relevance to the events of the last few days, the Geneva Convention states in Article 23 that no prisoner of war may “be sent to, or detained in areas where he may be exposed to fire or the combat zone” and that prisoners of war must be afforded protection against “air bombardment and other hazards of war.”

This is not the first time in recent years that US military forces have systematically disregarded these “laws of war.” In the final days of the Persian Gulf War US warplanes massacred thousands of retreating Iraqi troops in what one US pilot compared to “shooting fish in a barrel.” The road north from Kuwait City was so littered with the charred remains of Iraqi soldiers, trucks, cars and other vehicles that it became known as the “Highway of Death.”

The Geneva Convention was drawn up in the aftermath of World War II in an effort to place some restrictions on the murderous proclivities of the great powers. Today the Bush administration brazenly disregards international law and carries out war crimes, with barely a word of protest coming out of the US.

In the absence of any significant international outcry against the massacre at Mazar-i-Sharif, there is the danger that an even bigger bloodbath will be perpetrated at Kandahar, the second largest city of Afghanistan, where several thousand US Marines and US Special Forces and their newly recruited (and well-paid) allies among the Pushtun tribal chiefs are closing in on the last Taliban stronghold.



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