

After US massacre of Taliban POWs: the stench of death and more media lies

Jerry White

29 November 2001

Journalists and International Red Cross representatives reported a horrific scene of carnage Wednesday as they entered the prison compound near Mazar-i-Sharif, where up to 800 foreign Taliban prisoners were slaughtered during a three-day siege of the fortress directed by US special forces and CIA operatives.

Most of those killed, according to Northern Alliance sources quoted in the American press, died as a result of US air strikes on the prison compound. Throughout the three-day siege at least 30 bombing attacks were carried out by US warplanes and helicopter gunships, whose targets were pinpointed by special forces at the prison.

Witnesses reported seeing the dismembered corpses of hundreds of Taliban prisoners strewn amidst the rubble and still burning buildings, the blasted parts of dozens of dead horses and bullet-raked vehicles. An acrid smell of death filled the air as Red Cross personnel began loading bodies onto trailers to remove them for burial.

Northern Alliance General Rashid Dostum sought to prevent reporters from going into the Southern sector of the compound, claiming live prisoners might still be hiding among the piles of corpses, or others may have booby-trapped their bodies before being killed.

An Associated Press photographer who wandered into the area saw the dead bodies of 50 prisoners, who appeared to have been executed with their hands tied behind their backs with black scarves. Alliance soldiers were busy removing the scarves with knives and scissors.

The BBC reported that alliance troops continued to shoot at Taliban bodies in case any of the prisoners were still alive.

The dead were mostly Pakistanis, Chechens, Arabs and other non-Afghans who surrendered Saturday, November 24, when the Taliban's northern stronghold of Kunduz fell to the Northern Alliance troops.

Various American media outlets broadcast some of these bloody scenes, along with warnings that the film footage might be disturbing to viewers. But the networks and newspapers refused to say what was obvious: that the bloodbath in Mazar-i-Sharif was a massacre, directed and chiefly carried out by the US—a war crime recalling such atrocities as the Nazi slaughters of World War II and the My Lai Massacre.

Rather the US media, exhibiting its contempt for the slaughtered prisoners and the people of Central Asia in general—whom the US claims to be defending against the Al Qaeda terrorists—focused its

attention on the death of a CIA agent at the prison compound. They portrayed this professional killer as a national hero, seeking to use his death to stoke up pro-war sentiment.

Amnesty International called Tuesday for an inquiry into the events at the Qala-i-Janghi prison and the “proportionality of the response” of Northern Alliance, US and British military forces. The International Committee of the Red Cross declared that the US had a moral obligation to abide by the full terms of the Geneva Convention, which mandates the humane treatment of prisoners of war.

The major preoccupation of the US media, however, has been to cover up the direct role of the CIA, the US military and the Bush administration in the slaughter. The media has uncritically repeated the American government's claim that the killing was justified because Taliban prisoners had smuggled weapons into the fortress and launched an unprovoked attack against their Northern Alliance captors. This version is directly contradicted by various eyewitness testimonies. But even if it were truthful, it would not justify, even from a military standpoint, the mass murder of largely defenseless prisoners.

There is increasing evidence that the so-called uprising was provoked by US forces and their Northern Alliance proxies as a pretext for the massacre of foreign Taliban prisoners. According to a report in Wednesday's *Times* of London, widespread resistance by the Taliban prisoners did not erupt until Sunday morning, after CIA agents interrogating Taliban POWs got involved in a confrontation and shot and killed at least five unarmed prisoners.

The *Times* reported that the “rebellion may have also been sparked by efforts to tie up the Taliban prisoners, many of whom apparently believed they were about to be killed. About 250 prisoners had been bound by their guards, according to one report, before the rest rebelled.”

The article noted the strange fact that at least two of the vehicles containing the surrendering Taliban were not searched, leaving open the possibility that Northern Alliance forces and their American allies deliberately allowed weapons to be brought into the compound in order to facilitate an “uprising,” which they would then crush with superior firepower.

The newspaper provided the following account of the incident that set off the rebellion. A witness told the *Times*: “The fighting started when the Taleban were being questioned by two men from the CIA. They wanted to know where they had come from and whether they might be al-Qaeda.”

Both CIA operatives were dressed in Afghan robes, had grey beards and spoke Persian. One of them was known as Michael, the other as David, the *Times* reported.

The *Times'* eyewitness account continued: "Michael asked one Taleb why he had come to Afghanistan. He replied: 'We're here to kill you,' and jumped at Michael, who killed him and three others with his pistol before being wrestled to the ground."

Several other Taliban prisoners reportedly responded by beating, kicking and biting to death one CIA agent (now identified by the CIA as paramilitary operations officers Johnny "Mike" Spann), and then turning on the alliance guards.

The *Times'* eyewitness said the second CIA agent, "David," also killed "at least one prisoner," and then ran out of the building where the prisoners were being interrogated to the main building, where he used a satellite phone to call the US embassy in Uzbekistan and ask for helicopters and troops to storm the prison.

US and British special forces, based at a military airport just outside the fort, arrived first and began the assault. Footage from German television showed soldiers firing over the walls into the mass of prisoners inside. Others entered the fort in an apparent effort to rescue the agents or recover their bodies. In the meantime, the second agent scrambled down a fortress wall to safety.

Any Taliban prisoners who attempted to escape were quickly put to death by US, British or Alliance forces. There were news reports of Taliban corpses propped in a gateway, each killed by a single bullet to the head.

The US bomb assault began on Sunday and intensified on Monday. By nightfall on November 26 the number of surviving prisoners had fallen to perhaps 100, from the original 800 in the compound. Bombing continued throughout the night, reducing the number of survivors even further.

Describing the gruesome scene, the *Times* of London wrote: "The nighttime raids left many bodies half-buried in the ground. Limbs and torsos rose out of the disturbed ground like tree trunks after a forest fire."

Early Tuesday, November 27, trucks carrying 200 Alliance troops and an anti-aircraft gun arrived at the fortress, as American special forces moved in and US warplanes circled above. Taking no prisoners, the Alliance forces went room by room, killing anyone left alive, including the wounded, and even firing bullets and rockets into corpses.

The fighting ended Tuesday afternoon after US and British special forces set fire to oil poured into a shelter where three Taliban prisoners remained. A Northern Alliance tank then drove over the bodies of several Pakistani and Arab Taliban volunteers and fired three rounds at a range of 20 yards, obliterating the building and killing the last holdouts.

Underestimating the number of prisoners, Abdullah Jan Tawhidi, a deputy in the Alliance's Ministry of Security and Intelligence, said, "Up to 300 foreign troops were killed. It was not a big deal."

The foreign prisoners were brought to the fortress under an agreement between the Taliban commander in Kunduz and Alliance leader General Rashid Dostum to give up the city. Five thousand Afghan Taliban soldiers were reportedly allowed to defect, or given safe passage to return to their villages, while non-Afghans were imprisoned in Dostum's fortress headquarters, Qala-

i-Janghi. Top US officials, including Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, publicly opposed any deal that would have allowed safe passage of foreign Taliban troops to Pakistan in exchange for their surrender, and made clear their preference that the foreign Taliban be killed.

In the face of increasing evidence to the contrary, Dostum denied any ill-treatment of the foreign POWs by his forces. But Dostum is already under investigation for the initial assault earlier this month in Mazar-i-Sharif, where the Red Cross discovered 600 bodies. Moreover, reports have surfaced of his troops massacring local and foreign Taliban soldiers in Kunduz this week. The Associated Press reported, "Stomping on faces of captured Taliban and shooting others as they lay wounded, opposition forces rampaged through Kunduz on Monday."

Dostum is said to be holding another 6,000 Taliban prisoners in the nearby town of Sheberghan.

There is little doubt that similar massacres are taking place in the south of Afghanistan, where US Marines have begun a search and destroy mission in Kandahar, the Taliban's last stronghold. Gul Agha, a senior commander with ethnic Pashtun forces in southern Afghanistan, said Wednesday that 160 captured Taliban fighters who refused to surrender were executed with machine guns before the eyes of US military personnel, according to a Reuters news dispatch.

The whitewash of US war crimes by the American media has included the so-called liberal press, such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, which have not even published editorial comments on the prison massacre. On the contrary, in a cowardly editorial Tuesday, the *New York Times* gave backhanded support to the Pentagon's cold-blooded policy, writing, "One problem left over from earlier combat is the fate of foreigners who fought for the Taliban in northern Afghanistan and have now been defeated. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld is right to demand that they not simply be allowed to drift away..."



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsws.org/contact