

More evidence of US war crimes in Afghanistan: Taliban POWs suffocated inside cargo containers

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13 December 2001

Scores, if not hundreds, of Taliban prisoners of war suffocated to death inside metal cargo containers where they were imprisoned after surrendering to Northern Alliance and US forces in the Afghan city of Kunduz in late November. The Taliban prisoners, mostly foreign volunteers from Pakistan, died of asphyxiation and injuries inside the airtight shipping containers during a two or three day journey to a prison in the town of Sheberghan, according to a report in Tuesday's *New York Times*.

These horrific deaths occurred around the same time as hundreds of other Taliban POWs from Kunduz were being massacred by US and Northern Alliance forces at the prison fortress near Mazar-i-Sharif, and have been followed by reports of widespread killings of surrendering soldiers in the Kandahar area and elsewhere. Nothing more clearly exposes the barbaric and colonial character of the war in Afghanistan than the fact that the US and its proxy forces are openly and knowingly violating the Geneva Convention by carrying out the deliberate torture and extermination of non-Afghan Taliban prisoners.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), mandated by the Geneva Convention to ensure the humane treatment of war prisoners, announced it would conduct an investigation into the deaths in the shipping containers. Macarena Aguilar, an ICRC spokeswoman said, "Our staff first visited the prison at Sheberghan on Monday, after pushing for 10 days to be allowed to do so." Aguilar said many of the 3,000 prisoners there were in need of medical treatment and that ICRC workers had arranged for those needing surgery to be moved to a local hospital.

Journalists who had also been barred from the prison entered last Saturday and began interviewing prisoners, as well as the Northern Alliance commander in charge. Colonel General Jurabek said 43 prisoners had died inside the containers, while another 3 died from their wounds upon arrival. Several prisoners interviewed by the *Times*, however, said the number was much higher.

Omar, described by the newspaper as a "pale and slight youth," said through the bars of his prison wing that all but seven people in his container died from lack of air. He estimated that more than 100 had died. Another Pakistani said 13 had died in his container and that survivors had taken turns to breathe through a hole in the metal wall.

One prisoner, Ibrahim, a 30-year-old Pakistani mechanic interviewed by the *Times* in the presence of General Jurabek, said he thought some 35 people died in his container en route from Kunduz. "No oxygen, no oxygen," he said urgently in English. "The general corrected him and said only five or six had died," the *Times* reported.

One witness, a local driver who declined to be interviewed but

spoke to Afghan acquaintances, said he had seen soldiers unloading many dead bodies from a container by the road not far from Sheberghan. Three containers were lined up by the road in Dasht-i-Laili, and soldiers were unloading one container that was full of bodies, throwing them onto the ground, he said.

Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions prohibits "violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture," of prisoners of war. Moreover Article 20 mandates that the "evacuation of prisoners of war shall always be effected humanely." The same article requires that "the Detaining Power shall supply prisoners of war who are being evacuated with sufficient food and potable water, and with necessary clothing and medical attention" and "take all suitable precautions to ensure their safety during evacuation."

The war crimes being carried out by the US are unprecedented for a country that claims to be democratic. The wanton slaughter of prisoners of war recalls the barbaric treatment meted out by the Nazis to Soviet soldiers on the Eastern Front and is conduct condemned as uncivilized for hundreds of years.

The US media, in keeping with its role as an uncritical propaganda arm of the Pentagon, largely ignored the atrocity in Sheberghan. A lone editorial in the *Baltimore Sun* urged "Washington to declare loud and clear that the Geneva Convention must be observed for all prisoners held by all parties in Afghanistan." The editorial warned that failing to do so would undermine world opinion and "continued domestic support for the war effort, which includes the behavior of allies."

Such appeals, however, are too little, too late. Top Bush administration and Pentagon officials, including Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld have gone on public record stating that the US prefers the killing of non-Afghan soldiers rather than a surrender deal that allowed them to return to their homes as afforded to Afghan-born Taliban prisoners. This itself is a violation of the Geneva Convention, which prohibits in Article 3 "any adverse distinction" between prisoners of war "founded on race, color, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria." Rumsfeld said explicitly that "America is not inclined to negotiate surrenders" and that he hoped al-Qaida forces would "either be killed or taken prisoner."

Bush officials have moreover suggested that non-Afghan Taliban fighters are not soldiers in a conventional war, but "illegal combatants," who are not covered by the protections of the Geneva Convention. This is a grotesque lie, since the Geneva Convention explicitly extends its provisions to participants in every kind of armed

conflict, including civil wars, a point recently emphasized by the International Red Cross. The Bush administration invented the category of “illegal combatants” in order to give a pseudo-legal cover to a policy of summary execution.

US officials are well aware that the forces they are directing have a history of murdering and torturing prisoners. In these incidents, if US forces are not openly collaborating in the massacre of prisoners—as they did at the fortress near Mazar-i-Sharif—they are, at the very least, turning a blind eye to the activities of their hired killers.

It was widely reported by the international media, including many American newspapers, that Northern Alliance commanders planned to kill non-Afghan POWs from Kunduz once CIA and US Special Forces interrogators were through with them. US military officers who oversaw the surrender of the city were well aware of this, and the US government did nothing to stop it, making top officials complicit in the war crimes.

On November 28, for example, *Times* reporter Dexter Filkins wrote an article, entitled, “Taliban: After Defeat, Journey to Uncertain Fate.” It described 14 truckloads of Taliban prisoners from Kunduz who were being kept in the desert by Northern Alliance leader Rashid Dostum because he was unable to send them to his prison fortress in Mazar-i-Sharif, which was under US bombardment.

“Because these Taliban were foreigners, mostly illiterate young men from Pakistan, they were not allowed to return to their homes—unlike the Taliban from Afghanistan. The future of the foreign prisoners is murky, with Northern Alliance commanders bickering over whether they should be tried and executed or turned over to the United Nations,” Filkins wrote. He added that the Northern Alliance “appeared to be giving these prisoners all the consideration it might afford a pile of spent bullets,” reporting that guards were ignoring the prisoners’ pleas for water and food and throwing stones at them.

Another article by the same reporter on December 2, entitled, “Taliban Arab, Like Many, Longs for Home but Faces a Doubtful Future,” focused on a 21-year-old Saudi prisoner, named Fahad Nasir, who was shot during the prison massacre after being captured in Kunduz.

Filkins described Nasir as “lying on the floor of an abandoned home, wrapped in a dirty blanket, with an infection gnawing his limb and Northern Alliance guards debating his future.” The “soldiers-turned-prisoners,” Filkins continued, “face an uncertain future. While some Northern Alliance commanders say they favor turning the men over to the United Nations, others prefer the old way, when prisoners were a luxury that few of the Afghan factions could afford.

“‘After we’re finished talking to them,’ said Syed Wasiqullah, a Northern Alliance officer in charge of Mr. Nasir and others, ‘they’re finished,’” he said, as he dragged his finger across his throat.

In addition to the deaths in Sheberghan there have been several other reports of massacres of Taliban POWs. On December 12, the Pakistan daily *Dawn* reported that hundreds of mainly Arab Taliban prisoners were massacred in Kandahar and other parts of southern Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban’s last stronghold. “Reports said that over 400 non-Afghan Taliban fighters, mainly Arabs, had been trapped and massacred by tribal militias in and around Kandahar since the Taliban surrendered Kandahar, Hilmand and Zabul,” the paper reported.

“A large number of dead bodies of Arab Taliban were found in various parts of Kandahar region,” travellers reaching there from different parts of southern Afghanistan told reporters.

“No tribal group is sparing the Arab Taliban,” Amanullah, one of the witnesses, told newsmen near the border. People living in areas

close to the Kandahar Airport had buried bodies of 21 Arab fighters the other day, he said, adding that they had been killed by the forces loyal to the governor of Kandahar. Sources said that other tribal groups were also involved in the killing of non-Afghan Taliban.

Slaughters of captured Taliban took place in the south well before the fall of Kandahar. In one incident in late November, 160 captured Taliban fighters were reportedly executed in the presence of US military advisers. An unnamed commander loyal to the governor of Kandahar, said the Taliban had refused repeated appeals to surrender. “They replied with abuse, so we had no choice,” he said. “We executed about 160 Taliban who were captured. They were made to stand in a long line and five or six of our fighters used light machineguns on them.” The commander claimed the US advisers, who had been filming the battle on videotape, made an unsuccessful attempt to stop the executions. US officials later said their investigation of the incident showed no wrongdoing.

One indication of how many foreign Taliban fighters have been killed in battle or after they were captured is a report that senior Pakistan government officials say as many as 8,000 Pakistanis who had gone to Afghanistan to fight against the US-led forces are dead or missing. Hundreds of Pakistani prisoners were apparently killed in the prison near Mazar-i Sharif, while others were trapped in Kandahar. Already this month, officials said, 2,000 Pakistani families in border areas have appealed to the government for help in locating their missing sons and fathers.

No credible estimate has been released of the number of people killed in Afghanistan by American bombing. If the death toll among Pakistani volunteers is as high as 8,000, the casualties among Afghans in the ranks of the Taliban—many of them young boys and unwilling soldiers drafted at gunpoint—are likely to be many times that figure.

But even if one counts only the prisoners who were killed after surrendering—shot, bombed, suffocated, throats slit—the number is likely to be greater than the death toll on September 11. No one can claim that any of these helpless POWs had any responsibility for terrorist attacks which took place 10,000 miles away. Those who perpetrated the destruction of the World Trade Center were guilty of mass murder. Those giving the orders for the slaughter now taking place in Afghanistan are perpetrating even greater crimes.



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