

Why Britain should be indicted for war crimes: The SAS role in the Qala-i-Janghi massacre

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The Labour government has refused Amnesty International's demand for an inquiry into the massacre of hundreds of Taliban prisoners at the Qala-i-Janghi fortress in late November.

An Amnesty International statement issued November 30 says, "The rejection of an inquiry by the United Kingdom into what is apparently the single most bloody incident of the war, during which serious abuses of international human rights and humanitarian law may have been committed, raises questions about their commitment to the rule of law."

The organisation asks, "What can there be to fear from an inquiry except the truth and a clear message that impunity will not be tolerated."

On November 29, Labour MP Alice Mahon tabled an early day motion in parliament supporting Amnesty's call for a public inquiry. Citing the "presence of British and American special forces on site during the massacre and the heavy bombardment of the prisoners by the US Air Force," the motion noted, "that the Northern Alliance commander of the Fort, General Dostum, is a notorious killer with a long record of war crimes". Mahon asked for a government statement on the matter and for all those responsible for massacres in Kabul and elsewhere to "answer for their war crimes at an international criminal court convened by the United Nations."

In reply, Leader of the House Robin Cook claimed he was "not aware of massacres in Kabul," adding, "The relative orderliness of life in Kabul has been a remarkable feature of events since the defeat of the Taliban. The great majority of the population have welcomed the defeat and disappearance of the Taliban."

Cook claimed not to have full information on events at the fortress and said, "International law is clear: prisoners' human interests and needs should be respected. However, it is also robust in providing that those who are combatants need not expect to be treated as prisoners of war. The matter for debate is whether the response was appropriate for prisoners who had armed themselves with Kalashnikovs, mortar guns and a tank and, in those circumstances, whether it was right to regard them solely as prisoners."

Cook cannot agree to demands for an inquiry because Britain's elite Special Air Service (SAS) was intimately involved in the Qala-i-Janghi massacre. His claim not to know what took place at the fortress is even more cynical, given his membership of the war cabinet and the extensive coverage of events in the media. In rejecting any inquiry into Qala-i-Janghi, the Blair government is relying on the mass media not to question the official version of events; with few exceptions, he has not been disappointed.

Coverage of the war in Britain's top selling tabloid—the *Sun*, owned by Rupert Murdoch—is positively bloodthirsty. With apparent pleasure, the paper devotes pages to reporting the latest bombing of Afghan towns and villages, describing with enthusiasm, bordering on relish, the advanced weaponry of the imperialist powers. On November 28, it carried a two-page picture spread under the banner headline, "SAS Take Out Rebels" with the subheading "British heroes smash prison siege as 450 Taliban are killed."

Repeating the official version that Taliban prisoners had broken into the armoury and mounted an armed uprising against their captors, the paper reports, "At least 50 [Northern] Alliance men were killed in the

fighting that followed and five US special forces soldiers were wounded by a bomb that went astray from one of their own aircraft.

“But yesterday, in the finest traditions of their audacious motto Who Dares Wins, the Hereford-based SAS came to the rescue.”

Accompanying a series of pictures in which the *Sun* had blurred the faces of SAS men so they could not be identified, the paper spoke in glowing terms of the role of the British murder squad: “By yesterday afternoon only **TWO** of the 450 Taliban were left alive inside the Qala-i-Janghi fortress. Finally they too were killed—blasted to bits by a tank shell as they stood on the ramparts.” (emphasis in original)

Given the scale and circumstances of the killings, however, it was inevitable that the government’s official version of events would be questioned and even ridiculed by some.

On November 29, the *Guardian* newspaper carried an article by Isabel Hilton headlined “There is no excuse for this savagery”, with an underline of “We too are responsible for the massacre at Qala-i-Janghi fort.”

Hilton speaks of the official version, presented as a rebellion by captured Taliban, as “bizarre,” declaring: “We are invited to believe that in the final appalling hours of the prisoners’ revolt they were fighting to the death and by then, no doubt they were. But if that had been their intent from the start, why did they not fight to the death defending Kunduz? Were they led into a trap in the fort, then provoked into rebellion once they realised that the promises they had been given were hollow?”

Writing in the *Independent*, in an article also reprinted in the mass-circulation *Mirror*, veteran correspondent Robert Fisk insists, “We are becoming war criminals in Afghanistan.” He notes, “US Special Forces—and, it has emerged, British troops—helped the Alliance to overcome the uprising and, sure enough, CNN tells us some prisoners were ‘executed’ trying to escape.

“It is an atrocity. British troops are now stained with war crimes.”

Notwithstanding such public indictments of British actions, the government calculates that it can rely on the base and unprincipled character of the liberal media to ensure any criticism does not get out of hand. Having urged Prime Minister Tony Blair not to dismiss calls

for an inquiry, on December 1 the *Guardian* published an article specifically attributing the massacre to a series of “errors” on the part of the US.

The newspaper criticised Washington for trying to “wash its hands of the episode”, calling the actions of the two CIA officers “incredibly stupid and unprofessional”, but saying nothing about the role of British forces, or the Blair government. Instead it reassured New Labour, “A head of steam is unlikely to build up around this issue, however. At his weekly appearance in the Commons this week, Tony Blair faced only one question about Afghanistan and that was about Marjan, the one-eyed lion at Kabul zoo.”

The *Guardian* is making a grave mistake in believing it can brush aside Britain’s role in the Qala-i-Janghi massacre with a misplaced humorous reference; one that only demonstrates that parliament is as far removed from genuine concerns over democratic principles as are the cynics who occupy its own Farringdon Road editorial offices. What was hailed as a civilising mission to bring democracy to the region, has ended in the most flagrant breach of all known conventions on war: the murder of unarmed prisoners including those with their arms bound behind their backs. Blair and his coterie stand condemned as war criminals for the role of Britain’s SAS in this barbarous act.



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