

Afghanistan: US forces carry out cold-blooded murder at Kandahar hospital

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1 February 2002

In a one-sided battle in Kandahar on Monday, a US-led military force shot and killed six foreign Taliban supporters who had been barricaded into a ward of the Mirwais hospital since early December. The US military put the incident down to the intransigence of the six and their desire to be Islamic martyrs. But if one strips away the obfuscations, half-truths and bald-faced lies, what took place was another case of cold-blooded murder.

According to the official account, the whole operation was carried out by 100 Afghan militia belonging to Kandahar governor Gul Agha Shirzai—"advised" by squad of US special forces and snipers. An initial attack on the "Arabs" began in the early hours of the morning and was driven back.

Another assault began around 1.45pm. Snipers crawled into position, soldiers broke in through the hospital windows and the sound of stun grenades, pistol fire and automatic weapons was heard by journalists gathered outside. Three quarters of an hour later, it was all over. The result: all six "Al Qaeda" were dead; several Afghan militiamen were wounded, one seriously.

Major Chris Miller, the US officer-in-charge, told journalists: "Up to the last minute, we told every man to surrender. But none of them listened. These Arabs fought to the death." Khalid Pashtun, senior adviser to Gul Agha, parroted the same line: "It is all over. They fought until the last drop of their blood. We gave them an ultimatum and we said their lives would be spared, but they would not listen. We had no other choice."

As far as Miller and the US military were concerned, the case was closed—the "Arabs" got what they wanted... and deserved. Some of his troops were sporting "I love New York" badges and New York Yankee baseball caps—an indication that they were out for revenge... and got it.

What really took place?

It is not possible to answer every question from the available press reports. All of the articles, in one way or another, echo the official position—hardened Islamic terrorists... intent on becoming martyrs... died as a result. Nothing is rigorously questioned or probed. Any more critical observations appear as afterthoughts or nagging doubts. Even by sifting these accounts, however, a different story emerges.

Who were these six and were they Al Qaeda members?

According to one of the hospital staff, Dr Musa, they were all young men—between 17 and 25. They were what remained of a group of 19 wounded foreign Taliban fighters trapped in the hospital in early December, following the collapse of the previous regime. The rest had fled, had been killed or arrested. Those who remained were the most seriously injured.

The labels "Al Qaeda," "international terrorist," and "Arab" are applied so interchangeably in the media to all foreign Taliban supporters that it is impossible to say what their affiliations were with any certainty. Reportedly the six came from Saudi Arabia, Algeria and Yemen. Their age indicates that the majority, if not all, were not hardened Al Qaeda members, but impressionable young men who came to Afghanistan seeking to defend the Taliban regime. The very fact that they were left behind indicates their insignificance to Osama bin Laden.

Why did they hold out?

A number of reasons may have influenced their unwillingness to surrender, not least the reputation of newly installed governor and US ally Gul Agha. An article in the *New York Times* on January 6 describes the warlord as a backward thug who rules his own militia with bullying and beatings, and metes out far worse to his enemies. Before marching on Kandahar, he had exhorted his troops to show no mercy to "Arabs and Pakistanis" and had been good to his word when he slaughtered foreign Taliban supporters at Kandahar airport.

The six Taliban supporters were boxed into a corner. Two of their fellow "Arabs"—in fact Uighurs from China—had been tricked by hospital staff and captured. Two weeks ago, at the instigation of the US military, the hospital had cut off their food supplies—a move that the Red Cross condemned as inhumane. According to the hospital's catering manager, Mohammad Rasul, they had "only one Russian-made pistol and a number of grenades... some were badly wounded. One had lost a leg and others had been hit in the stomach."

It is not even clear that the six understood the calls for their surrender on Monday. Gul Agha's spokesman explained that they had been hailed through loudspeakers but failed to say in what language. As if by way of an afterthought, he added that they had been sent a videotape in Arabic calling on them to give up.

Did they “fight to the death”?

To what extent any genuine fight took place is highly questionable. Having botched the first attack, the US and Afghan troops called up fire engines to pump water into the rooms where the Arabs were holed up. A debate took place about the efficacy of electrocuting the six by placing live wires in the water. That was ruled out—perhaps it would have appeared too much like murder. So a second assault was prepared and successfully carried out.

Several press reports raise doubts that the US-led force ever intended to capture the six alive. According to a *Reuters* article, the first police statement announced that only two were dead. An update followed minutes later, after fresh firing, that all were dead. An *Independent* journalist in Kandahar commented: “The truth is not clear. Four Afghan soldiers were wounded by grenade fragments or bullets and the rest may not have been in a mood to take prisoners.”

The scene after the shoot-out points to a further discrepancy. A local Afghan journalist managed to enter the rooms and produced a videotape of the scene which showed six bodies riddled with bullets on the floor. Three of those who were “fighting to the death” were found huddled under two beds.

What part did the US play?

Major Miller told the press: “Strictly advise and assist was our role.” Even on the available evidence the comment is a direct lie. The US special forces had been training the Afghan militia for just a week. American snipers were on the spot. The *New York Times* reported: “Figures in the jackets and khakis worn by special forces were visible in the thick of the action. An *Associated Press* reporter saw at least one throwing explosives.” According to *Reuters*, an American could clearly be heard shouting orders.

More significant, however, is the shadowy presence of Americans out of uniform. A *New York Times* article revealed that an American in plainclothes was directing operations in the hospital ward after the assault. “At 6.15 pm, a convoy of pickup trucks left the hospital compound, at least one of them adorned with an ‘I love New York’ bumper sticker. Plainclothes Americans carrying M-16 assault rifles rode in the backs of several of the trucks... It is not clear where the bodies were taken.”

It is an open secret that the CIA has been active in southern Afghanistan since September 11, working alongside warlords such as Gul Agha. But why should they and the US military be so keen to make off with six bodies? This bizarre twist to events perhaps points to the reason for the operation and its timing. The standoff at Kandahar hospital did not pose any significant military danger but it had become an acute political embarrassment to governor Gul Agha and his US advisers.

A *Washington Post* article explained: “Many local Afghans had previously expressed sympathy for the barricaded Arabs, and there was widespread public opposition to the decision to stop providing them with food... After the food supplies were

cut off, there were frequent reports that civilians, doctors and some Afghan soldiers guarding the hospital were bringing in food surreptitiously.”

Moreover, there is rising hostility in the area to the arbitrary attacks of the US military, which are continuing to take a heavy toll in civilian lives. Only last week, US special forces attacked two compounds at Hazar Qadam, some 100km north of Kandahar, killing about 15 people and taking another 27 prisoners. Locals, however, insist that the Taliban had already departed and that the dead belonged to a local militia. Moreover, they accused the US soldiers of executing several prisoners—two bodies were found in the rubble with their hands bound behind their backs.

The Pentagon continues to maintain that the target was an Al Qaeda “leadership facility” and that the special forces had not been misled by rivals to the local tribe. Speaking from US Central Command in Florida, Major Bill Harrison sought to reassure the media that the US military had other sources of information—U-2 planes, satellite reconnaissance, Predator drones and electronic surveillance aircraft. He declined to explain, however, how any of these sophisticated techniques had determined who was present at two compounds in remote rural Afghanistan.

At any rate, “explanations” that are simply bald denials carry very little weight with the family, friends and clan members of the victims. A number of such outrages have led to a rapid escalation of public resentment against the US military presence. In that context, the six fighters barricaded in the Kandahar hospital threatened to become a focus for the growing anger and a decision was taken to liquidate them.

The wounded Taliban supporters had been left to their own devices for weeks—largely because this particular military problem could not be solved with a cruise missile or a load of bombs from a B-52. Any attack had to take place in the middle of a busy city—in the public glare.

So the military operation had to be carefully prepared, along with the necessary cover story. Thus the week of training, the pat story delivered to assembled journalists... and the cleanup operation by the CIA and its helpers. In such a situation, no evidence could be left behind that would in any way contradict the official version of events.



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