

Afghan villagers killed and prisoners beaten in US military "mistake"

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After a fortnight of flat denials from the Bush administration and the US military, the truth is finally emerging about the bloody events in the early hours of January 24 in the Afghan village of Hazar Qadam in Uruzgan Province.

The Pentagon claimed to have scored a significant victory. US Special Forces had attacked two "leadership compounds" that contained significant quantities of arms. At least 15 Taliban fighters had been killed in what one defence official described as "intense fighting" and 27 prisoners were seized for interrogation at the US base in Kandahar. Pentagon spokeswoman Victoria Clarke announced that they included "relatively senior" Taliban leaders.

From the outset, Afghan officials and villagers accused the US of attacking the wrong target. Uruzgan governor Jan Muhammad Khan insisted that there had been no Taliban or Al Qaeda fighters at the two compounds. Some of the dead, he explained, were his own militia who had been guarding weapons collected as part of a government disarmament program.

The Pentagon, however, dismissed the allegations of Khan and others, out of hand. Senior spokesman Rear Admiral John Stufflebeam told the press there were "clear indications" that the buildings were "a legitimate military target". The evidence, he claimed, was that one compound had the appearance of a "meeting house" and that US forces had been fired on.

Last week the first begrudging admissions emerged that the US military had made a mistake. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld conceded that "friendly" Afghan forces may have been killed in the raid. He offered no explanation or apology, saying that he did not want to prejudice an ongoing investigation by the US Central Command. But without the results of any inquiry or other evidence, he baldly declared that US forces had been fired on first.

In a tacit admission that its previous assertions were false, the military released all 27 of the prisoners—again without any explanation or apology. Journalists with the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and other US newspapers, all reported that CIA operatives had returned to the area and were offering \$1,000 each to the families of the victims as compensation—or rather as hush money.

However, four of the released prisoners spoke out, not only describing the raid in detail but also accusing US troops of severely beating them while in custody. The two "leadership compounds" were a government building being used by officials loyal to the new Afghan administration headed by Hamid Karzai, including the newly appointed district police chief Abdul Rauf, and a school. Both were being utilised to store weapons gathered as part of Karzai's arms collection program, and for obvious reasons were guarded.

US Special Forces burst into the two buildings while most of the

men were asleep. Rauf said he was awoken by shouting and gunfire just before 3am, recognised American voices and tried to calm his men by saying, "They are our friends." The police chief, who puts his age at between 60 and 65, was knocked to the floor and repeatedly kicked. One of his ribs was broken and he blacked out.

At the government building, two of the local police were killed. Rauf and 26 others were bundled into a helicopter and flown to Kandahar—just to the south of Uruzgan. Those at the school were not so fortunate. A *Washington Post* report described the scene: "Its courtyard is now a graveyard of twisted, shrapnel-shredded vehicles. Its façade is pocked with hundreds of bullet holes. The floor of one classroom is marked with bloodstains. The administrative office is charred black."

Amanullah, 25, was one of about 30 employees of the disarmament commission, sleeping in the building. He explained that a rocket hit the school then the troops burst in, spraying the room with bullets. He saw his cousin struggling with soldiers, ran and hid in a nearby mosque. When he returned the following morning his cousin was dead, with bullet wounds to the back of his neck, stomach and shoulder. All the shots appeared to have been fired from behind and his cousin's hands were bound with white plastic handcuffs.

Amanullah said eight of the bodies at the school had been handcuffed. Other villagers made similar allegations, showing reporters the handcuffs cut from two of the dead. Two phrases—"Made in USA" and "The user assumes responsibility for injury resulting from negligence" were imprinted in the plastic. No official explanation has been offered.

A report in the *Los Angeles Times* conjectured that the US soldiers had "handcuffed anyone who appeared to be wounded or dead so they could move on quickly." But if the handcuffs were used to immobilise, why were the men just left there? Why were some handcuffed and not others? If only those who showed signs of life were bound, why were they allowed to bleed to death? None of these questions are asked let alone answered because the purpose of the speculation was to draw the reader away from the more troubling question: were these men summarily executed?

The head of the local disarmament commission was among those killed in the raid. His replacement Aziz Agha explained that he had lost nine family members in an earlier US bombing raid when a family tractor-trailer was taken for a fleeing Al Qaeda vehicle. He angrily told reporters: "Americans are coming and bombing places, killing people, tying up their hands and taking them from here... This is a crime."

The account in the *Washington Post* described what happened after the prisoners arrived at the US base in Kandahar. "All 27 men were

forced onto their stomachs, with their hands tied behind their backs and their feet chained, according to each of the four former prisoners interviewed. They were then all connected with a rope, they said. ‘They were walking on our backs like we were stones,’ Rauf said. ‘They hit me in the head. My nose hit the ground and became very swollen’.

In the morning, US soldiers tore off their clothes and instructed them to put on blue uniforms. At one point Akhtar Mohammad, 17, lost consciousness and was kept in solitary in a large shipping container for much of his detention. No reasons were given. Six of the 27 were being held by the Afghan police on criminal charges when the US soldiers swooped in. They were separated while the remaining 20 were kept in a “cage” with wooden bars and a canvas top.

Allah Noor, 40, a farmer turned policeman for the new government, explained that he had suffered two fractured ribs at the Kandahar military base: “They were beating us on the head and back and ribs. They were punching us with fists, kicking me with their feet. They said: ‘You are terrorist! You are Al Qaeda! You are Taliban!’” While the treatment moderated when the military realised the prisoners had no connection with either group, the damage had already been done. The elderly Rauf, who could barely stand because of blows to his kidneys, bitterly told the press: “I can never forgive them.”

Having been forced to acknowledge that a “mistake” may have been made, the US administration, the military and the media are now busily manufacturing further self-serving “explanations” to justify the murder of innocent people and their brutal treatment of prisoners.

On the raid itself, Defence Secretary Rumsfeld gave the lead to others when he said: “It is not a neat, clean, tidy situation [in Afghanistan].” Pentagon spokeswoman Victoria Clarke elaborated on the theme, saying: “To say the conditions in Afghanistan are confusing is an understatement. And it’s impossible to say these people are on this side and these people are on the other side. People are on multiple sides, and they switch sides.”

A more sophisticated version of this explanation has been floated in a number of press reports—that the US was deliberately fed misleading information by the rivals of local officials. The *Los Angeles Times*, for instance, explained that a local militia commander Mohammed Yunis was bitter over his replacement as head of the local disarmament commission—and had disappeared.

It is true that loyalties in the Pashtun tribal areas in the south and east of Afghanistan, previously stronghold of the Taliban, are confused and confusing. But if the situation is confused then all the more reason to take greater care, especially when lives are at stake. When in denial mode, Pentagon spokesmen are at pains to assure the public that no mistake is possible, that targets are exhaustively investigated, that multiple sources of intelligence are used, including local informers and a barrage of sophisticated surveillance from U-2 spy planes to pilotless Predator drones.

What the attack on Hazar Qadam reveals, however, is that very little care was taken in identifying the target. All the electronic wizardry at the disposal of the US military could not distinguish the political loyalties of the men in the two buildings. At best it was able to focus broadly on “suspicious activity”. Information about political allegiances could only come from local informers. The Pentagon has refused to name its sources but it is clear they were not the Uruzgan governor and other local officials who have asked the obvious question—why were they not consulted?

As to the beatings, General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, flatly denied any mistreatment of the 27 prisoners

during a press conference yesterday. “I simply don’t believe that any of the detainees... were subject to beatings or rough treatment,” he said. For emphasis he added: “The fact that they were detained and not killed I think is an indication of just how professional and disciplined and dedicated our folks are.” He neglected to comment on the 21 Afghans who were not so fortunate or what their deaths showed about the activities of the US military.

The raid at Uruzgan is just one of a number of incidents that have surfaced in which innocent Afghans have been killed by the US military. The rising toll and the completely unconvincing character of the official response have prompted several editorials in the “liberal” press suggesting that the Bush administration adopt a different tack. There is clearly concern in US ruling circles that mounting evidence of the brutal methods employed by the US forces will undermine public support for the war.

The *Washington Post*, for example, commented: “It may be that some or even all of these disturbing reports are inaccurate, in part or in whole. But what is most troubling at the moment is the manifest reluctance of the Pentagon to respond seriously to them. Defence Secretary Rumsfeld set the tone early on; in his televised press conferences, he regularly dismissed reports of civilian casualties as terrorist propaganda.”

The newspaper noted that “tragic mistakes that kill the wrong people are inescapable in war” and urged the Pentagon to “investigate vigorously, be clear and open in its explanations, and be prepared to take action in cases of improper behaviour”.

But a review of what is known about the Uruzgan raid suggests a more straightforward explanation both of the operation and the Pentagon response. The special forces raid was not “a mistake” or “an unintended tragedy”. The military planners, CIA officials and defence intelligence officials who targeted the two “leadership compounds” were simply not particularly concerned who was caught in the crossfire. Whether they captured Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters or not, the operation would serve to terrorise a population which had previously been sympathetic to the Taliban and is growing increasingly hostile to the presence of US troops.



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