

British shooting of civilians heightens tensions in Afghanistan

Mike Ingram
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British troops came under fire in Kabul last week in what was widely suspected of being a revenge attack for the army's shooting at an Afghan family attempting to take a 22 year-old pregnant woman to hospital.

According to reports by the International Security and Assistance Force (Isaf), the latest incident involved three gunmen shooting at soldiers from the Parachute Regiment climbing out of their vehicle to mount a foot patrol. The gunmen fled after the soldiers returned fire, and there were no reports of any casualties. Neither Isaf nor the Afghan police are officially linking the shooting with the February 16 incident, but this cannot be ruled out given the threats made by the dead man's relatives.

Mohammed Ishaq told reporters following the death of his brother Amaun, "They [the soldiers] should be tried and punished in accordance to Sharia [Islamic] law. We want their blood in retaliation for the blood of our brother. If we kill someone else [from Isaf] that would be the same as if we killed those murderers—it wouldn't matter to us."

British officials insist that the paratroopers only shot at a taxi containing members of the Ishaq family after gunshots were heard and bullets hit their watchtower, but Afghan officials have described this as "complete nonsense". Two of the soldiers involved in the shooting have been returned to Britain and the four others removed from active duties. An investigation into the incident is being carried out by the Royal Military Police. It is also most likely to produce a white-wash given Britain's insistence that the soldiers responded correctly to what they believed was an attack.

A report issued by the district police for the area where the February 16 incident occurred said that the paratroopers were not under fire, and had shot at the taxi after seeing its lights during the city's nightly curfew. Colonel Zemary Fazil reported that some of his

own men had been stationed in the same building as the six British paratroopers and had heard no shooting other than when the soldiers opened fire on the taxi. Fazil said he had been patrolling the same neighborhood himself and had heard nothing either.

According to the *Times*, Fazil said he was "absolutely certain that the only shooting had been from the Isaf position. My investigation into this matter is now completed, and my conclusion is that the Isaf soldiers opened fire on the taxi when the driver switched on his lights during the curfew. They made no attempt to find out what was going on."

The *Times* says the report "concludes that there was no good reason for the paratroopers to open fire."

Fazil said he had eight men stationed on the ground floor of a bakery in Kartayi Mamurin, an area on the edge of the city, on the night of the incident. The British paratroopers were positioned on the top of a 180 feet high grain silo at the side of the building that was being used as a watchtower. The soldiers were using night-vision goggles to observe the area.

At around 2am that night, Mohammed Ishaq had left his house half a mile from the bakery when his wife Sara went into labour. He asked his taxi driver neighbour, Mohammed Hashim, to take them to the police post in the bakery, where they planned to request an escort to take them to hospital. The city's curfew runs from 10pm to 5am. Moments later, 22 year-old Sara was helped down a path leading from her home by her family. With the pregnant girl safely inside the taxi, along with her husband, mother-in-law and brother-in-law, Hamayat Yaqobi, the driver switched on his lights and immediately came under fire from the paratroopers.

Yaqobi, a 20 year-old student, was struck by a bullet in the back of the head and died instantly. Sara suffered shrapnel wounds in her neck. She was to give birth to a

boy around 90 minutes after being carried back to her home. Her 40 year-old mother-in-law received a bullet fragment in her right shoulder and her husband was wounded in his left hand. The 35 year-old taxi driver suffered wounds to his face.

The British political elite has reacted to the incident with cold indifference to the fate of this innocent Afghan family. Opposition MPs demanded to know why the two soldiers had been sent home. For the Conservatives, Shadow Defence Secretary Bernard Jenkin said, “These soldiers have to make decisions about whether to answer fire or not and are answerable for their decisions, but these paratroopers were doing their duty.” Liberal Democrat defence spokesman, Paul Keetch, said, “All the British troops out in Kabul are acting under the same rules of engagement and by sending the two paratroopers home, it implies that they had acted outside the rules. This would be an unfortunate stain on their reputation.” In response Ministry of Defence sources said there was no question of the two soldiers having been sent home “in disgrace”.



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