

# Two more cases of coldblooded murder in Afghanistan

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A major military operation involving US, British, Australian and other troops has been underway in eastern Afghanistan, in addition to ongoing patrols by various special forces units throughout the area. What these soldiers are doing is shrouded in a cloak of official secrecy. Every now and then, however, a report leaks out that confirms a trend—those being killed are not “Al Qaeda” or “Taliban” but ordinary villagers and tribesmen whose deaths are treated with a mixture of indifference and contempt.

On May 10, Anthony Loyd, a correspondent for the London-based *Times* newspaper, exposed the truth about a clash in late April involving Australian and US troops, in which as many as four people were killed. US military spokesman Major Bryan Hilferty announced on April 30 that an Australian SAS reconnaissance team had killed two of the enemy in the initial gun battle the previous day. After US troops were flown into the area, two more “Al Qaeda terrorists” were killed in an ambush and a subsequent search of the area unearthed weapons, ammunition and cave complexes.

The Australian military was keen to bathe in the glory. Defence Force spokesman Mike Hannan announced in Canberra that the SAS soldiers had encountered four rebels who opened fire. “Our soldiers returned fire, killing or wounding two of the terrorists. At the same time it was decided to exploit the area for intelligence purposes and additional Australian special forces plus troops from the United States Airborne Division reacted and were inserted into the areas. This was a successful operation demonstrating good coalition response in a contact with Al Qaeda terrorists.”

US spokesman Hilferty praised the conduct of the Australian troops, saying: “We had a special forces

reconnaissance team, they were compromised, I mean people found them, and those people foolishly fired and the special forces fired back much more accurately, shooting and possibly killing two of them.”

As it turns out, the story was false. As Anthony Loyd explained: “The first holes in the coalition story appeared later that day. A special forces source involved in the shooting described a small number of armed men, probably Afghans, stumbling across a six-man team of Australian SAS. Surprised, the men raised their weapons and were shot in the chest by the SAS.

“Requesting extraction, the SAS troops were surprised by the arrival of two Chinooks full of American paratroopers, who began searching a nearby village. By their own account, the Americans admitted that one of the two weapons they found was an ancient Lee Enfield, which they took from a villager’s home as a trophy. The caves they discovered had livestock in them.”

Loyd expressed a degree of disgust both at the actions of the US and Australian military and the subservience of his fellow journalists in Afghanistan. “The incident is forgotten now,” he explained. “The men’s killing is curiously incidental to this particular story: if you carry a weapon in the wrong part of Afghanistan, and point it at coalition special forces, you will inevitably die quickly. It is the glib assurance of the coalition’s media machine in labelling the unidentified casualties as ‘Al Qaeda terrorists’ that is important.”

Loyd pointed out that the bulk of reporters have been “ensconced in coalition camps as little more than conveyors of propaganda.... They are registered, fed and accommodated by the coalition and given briefings so minimalist as to qualify as works of art.... The few British journalists who chose to stay away from Bagram [air base] and report from the field have been

regarded as mavericks who were ‘not on side’ and not to be trusted.”

“Seldom in a modern conflict has ‘fact’ been so manipulated as it is by the Western media and coalition forces in Afghanistan,” he concluded.

As if to confirm Loyd’s account, a second incident emerged last week. A spokesman for the US Central Command Lieutenant Colonel Martin Compton announced that American troops had raided a compound 80 km north of Kandahar on May 12 and killed five people in the course of a gun battle. Another 32 were taken captive.

Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Peter Pace said that the raid had been ordered because “we had intelligence that placed a senior Taliban commander there.” Pace and Compton refused to provide details of the raid or even say whether all the killed or captured were males. Pace admitted that the US military did not know the identities of the so-called enemy. “They do not carry ID cards. They do not always tell the truth. So, we do not know who we have right now,” he said.

Pace did not even bother to address the obvious question: if the US military had no idea who they attacked, why was the raid carried out in the first place? The “intelligence” that formed the basis for murdering five people was clearly no more than rumour and doubtful inference derived from electronic surveillance.

An article in the *New York Times* on May 14 cited American officials who admitted that the initial questioning of those detained provided no indications that the captives were either Taliban or Al Qaeda fighters. “So far we haven’t found anyone of great interest in this group. If they prove not to be bad guys, and were just in the wrong place at the wrong time, we’ll release them,” a senior military official said.

Some military officials insisted that “multiple intelligence indicators” pointed to the compound in Dehrawd in Oruzgan province being an enemy haven. “The compound was suspected of being a sanctuary for senior Al Qaeda and Taliban,” said Captain Steven O’Connor, a military spokesman at Bagram. None of these officials explained why the “indicators” had proven to be so wrong. Likewise no one offered condolences to the families and friends of the five who had been killed.

The WSWS reported on a similar incident in the early

hours of January 24. US special forces attacked two “leadership compounds” at the Afghan village of Hazar Qadam, also in Uruzgan province. At least 15 people were killed in what US defence officials described as “intense fighting” and another 27 were seized for interrogation. Local villagers and officials insisted that there had been no Al Qaeda or Taliban fighters at either compound. The provincial governor Jan Muhammad Khan explained that those killed included members of his militia who had been engaged in collecting arms as part of a government disarmament program.

Only grudgingly did the US defence officials finally concede that they had killed the wrong people. All 27 captives were released, but only after they had been humiliated, beaten and interrogated. A story circulated in the US media that CIA operatives had returned to the area to pay \$1,000 in hush money to the families of the victims. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld announced an investigation which quickly concluded that no fault rested with the US military or any of its personnel.

It takes a colonial mentality to rationalise such murders as “mistakes”. In this topsy turvy world, all Afghans are suspect, particularly those who carry arms. Given the country’s political history, that means a significant proportion of the male population. Any opposition to US presence is viewed as illegitimate and any threat to US troops, real or imagined, brings lethal consequences. As in Vietnam where all the bodies—men, women and children—were “Vietcong” or “NLF”, the corpses in Afghanistan are always “Al Qaeda” or “Taliban”. No proof is required, because, as Anthony Loyd pointed out, the US high command can rely on a thoroughly servile media.

That cracks have already begun to appear in this cynical propaganda is a symptom of growing disgust and opposition inside and outside Afghanistan to the actions of the coalition forces.



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