

Afghan war documentary charges US with mass killings of POWs

Showings in Europe spark demands for war crimes probe

Stefan Steinberg
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A documentary film, *Massacre in Mazar*, by Irish director Jamie Doran, was shown to selected audiences in Europe last week, provoking demands for an international inquiry into US war crimes in Afghanistan.

The film alleges that American troops collaborated in the torture of POWs and the killing of thousands of captured Taliban soldiers near the town of Mazar-i-Sharif. It documents events following the November 21, 2001 fall of Konduz, the Taliban's last stronghold in northern Afghanistan.

The film was shown in Berlin by the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism) parliamentary fraction to members of the German parliament on June 12. The following day it was shown to deputies and members of the press at the European parliament in Strasbourg.

After seeing the film, French Euro MP Francis Wurtz, a member of the United Left fraction that organised the showing, said he would call for an urgent debate on the issues raised in the film at the next session of the European parliament in July. A number of other deputies in the European parliament called on the International Committee of the Red Cross to carry out an independent investigation into the allegations raised in the film.

Leading international human rights lawyer Andrew McEntee, who was present at the special screening in Berlin, said it was "clear there is prima facie evidence of serious war crimes committed not just under international law, but also under the laws of the United States itself."

McEntee called for an independent investigation. "No functioning criminal justice system can choose to ignore this evidence," he said.

The Pentagon issued a statement June 13 denying the allegations of US complicity in the torture and murder of POWs, and the US State Department followed suit with a formal denial on June 14.

Doran, an award-winning independent filmmaker, whose documentaries have been seen in over 35 countries, said he

decided to release a rough cut of his account of war crimes because he feared Afghan forces were about to cover up the evidence of mass killings. "It's absolutely essential that the site of the mass grave is protected," Doran told United Press International after the screening in Strasbourg. "Otherwise the evidence will disappear."

Doran's call for the preservation of evidence was echoed by the Boston-based Physicians for Human Rights, which issued a statement June 14 urging that immediate steps be taken to safeguard the gravesite of the alleged victims near Mazar-i-Sharif.

Late last year Doran shot footage of the aftermath of the massacre of hundreds of captured Taliban troops at the Qala-i-Janghi prison fortress outside of Mazar-i-Sharif. His film clips, showing prisoners who had apparently been shot with their hands tied, ignited an international outcry over the conduct of American special operations forces and their Northern Alliance allies.

Doran's new film includes interviews with eyewitnesses to torture and the slaughter of some 3,000 POWs. It also contains footage of the desert scene where the alleged massacre took place. Skulls, clothing and limbs still protrude from the mound of sand, more than six months after the event.

The film has received widespread coverage in the European press, with articles featured in some of the main French and German newspapers (*Le Monde*, *Suddeutsche Zeitung*, *Die Welt*). Jamie Doran has also given interviews to two of the main German television companies.

While the documentary has become a major news story in Europe, it has been virtually blacked out by the American media. The UPI released a dispatch on the screenings last week, yet the existence of the film has not even been reported by such leading newspapers as the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post*. The film and its allegations of US war crimes have been similarly suppressed by the television networks and cable news

channels.

This reporter was able to view the 20-minute-long documentary in Berlin. In the course of the film a series of witnesses appear and testify that American military forces participated in the armed assault and killing of several hundred Taliban prisoners in the Qala-i-Janghi fortress. Witnesses also allege that, following the events at Qala-i-Janghi, the American army command was complicit in the killing and disposal of a further 3,000 prisoners, out of a total of 8,000 who surrendered after the battle of Konduz.

Afghan witnesses who speak of these atrocities are not identified by name, but, according to the director, all those testifying in the film are willing to give their names and appear before an international tribunal to investigate the events of the end of last November and beginning of December.

In Doran's film, Amir Jahn, an ally of Northern Alliance leader General Rashid Dostum, states that the Islamic soldiers who surrendered at Konduz did so only on the condition that their lives would be spared. Some 470 captives were incarcerated in Qala-i-Janghi. The remaining 7,500 were sent to another prison at Kala-i-Zein.

Following a revolt by a number of the prisoners in Qala-i-Janghi, the fortress was subjected to a massive barrage from the air as well as the ground by American troops. The atrocities inside Qala-i-Janghi are confirmed in the film by the head of the regional Red Cross, Simon Brookes, who visited the fort shortly after the massacre. He investigated the area and found bodies, many with their faces twisted in agony.

The American Taliban supporter John Walker Lindh was one of 86 Taliban fighters who were able to survive the massacre by hiding in tunnels beneath the fort. In one chilling scene in the film, we witness actual footage, secretly shot, of the interrogation of Lindh. We see him kneeling in the desert, in front of a long row of captive Afghans, being interrogated by two CIA officers. The officer leading the interrogation is heard to say: "But the problem is he needs to decide if he lives or dies. If he does not want to die here, he is going to die here, because we are going to leave him here and he's going to stay in prison for the rest of his life."

Massacre in Mazar then goes to describe the treatment meted out to the remaining thousands of captives who had surrendered to the Northern Alliance and American troops. A further 3,000 prisoners were separated out from the total of 8,000 who had surrendered, and were transported to a prison compound in the town of Shibarghan.

They were shipped to Shibarghan in closed containers, lacking any ventilation. Local Afghan truck drivers were commandeered to transport between 200 and 300 prisoners in each container. One of the drivers participating in the

convoy relates that an average of between 150 and 160 died in each container in the course of the trip.

An Afghan soldier who accompanied the convoy said he was ordered by an American commander to fire shots into the containers to provide air, although he knew that he would certainly hit those inside. An Afghan taxi driver reports seeing a number of containers with blood streaming from their floors.

Another witness relates that many of the 3,000 prisoners were not combatants, and some had been arrested by US soldiers and their allies and added to the group for the mere crime of speaking Pashto, a local dialect. Afghan soldiers testify that upon arriving at the prison camp at Shibarghan, surviving POWs were subjected to torture and a number were arbitrarily killed by American troops.

One Afghan, shown in battle fatigues, says of the treatment of prisoners in the Shibarghan camp: "I was a witness when an American soldier broke one prisoner's neck and poured acid on others. The Americans did whatever they wanted. We had no power to stop them."

Another Afghan soldier states, "They cut off fingers, they cut tongues, they cut their hair and cut their beards. Sometimes they did it for pleasure; they took the prisoners outside and beat them up and then returned them to the prison. But sometimes they were never returned and they disappeared, the prisoner disappeared. I was there."

Another Afghan witness alleges that, in order to avoid detection by satellite cameras, American officers demanded the drivers take their containers full of dead and living victims to a spot in the desert and dump them. Two of the Afghan civilian truck drivers confirm that they witnessed the dumping of an estimated 3,000 prisoners in the desert.

According to one of the drivers, while 30 to 40 American soldiers stood by, those prisoners still living were shot and left in the desert to be eaten by dogs. The final harrowing scenes of the film feature a panorama of bones, skulls and pieces of clothing littering the desert.



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