

Further evidence of a massacre of Taliban prisoners

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New reports from a human rights organisation and the German press have substantiated charges that US troops, aided by local and international allies, massacred thousands of defenceless Taliban in the course of the war in Afghanistan.

The international press first reported treatment of Taliban prisoners that systematically breached the Geneva Conventions at the end of November. At that time, American aircraft and helicopters quelled an apparent revolt by prisoners at the fortress of Qala-i-Janghi near Mazar-i-Sharif, which was bombed from the air. Several hundred prisoners died as a result of the bombardment, with just 86 surviving the attack.

The victims were members of the Taliban, who had previously surrendered in Konduz to troops led by the Uzbek general, Rashid Dostum, an ally of the Americans. Having surrendered, the Taliban were prisoners of war entitled to full protection under the Geneva Conventions.

From the approximately 8,000 fighters who surrendered in Konduz only 500 to 800 were taken to Qala-i-Janghi. Soon information emerged that other Taliban had been murdered.

Last January and February, a team from the Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), based in Boston, visited a number of graves in the Mazar-i-Sharif and Sheberghan area. They established that two of the mass graves that they investigated were of recent origin. The team quoted testimony from inhabitants of the region, who claimed to have seen scores of bodies unloaded from container trucks and buried in the desert by bulldozers.

In a May 1 letter to the provisional Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, the PHR wrote: "The forensic team also found evidence of recently disposed human remains in two of the nine gravesites that were visited. While we

are not in a position to verify the provenance of the remains in these sites, we heard speculation from well-informed international observers that one of these sites, near the city of Sheberghan, could have been a disposal ground of Taliban prisoners who had surrendered to the Northern Alliance in November and December 2001."

The report detailing the investigation (including photos) by the PHR and its letter to Karzai are available on at: (http://www.phrusa.org/research/afghanistan/report_graves.html#1 and http://www.phrusa.org/research/afghanistan/karzai_letter.html).

Earlier this month, Irish documentary filmmaker Jamie Doran screened his uncompleted film *Massacre in Mazar* in a number of European cities. Witnesses appearing in the film gave more accounts detailing a massacre of up to 3,000 Taliban.

According to these witnesses, between 200 and 300 of the prisoners from Konduz were packed into each of the containers, which were ostensibly being used to take them to the prison at Sheberghan. En route, approximately half of the captives suffocated or were killed by shots fired by soldiers into the airtight containers. Others were executed as the containers were unloaded into a mass grave in the desert. According to the witnesses, American soldiers were present during this massacre.

The German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* recently sent two reporters, Giuliana Sgrena and Ulrich Ladurner, to Mazar-i-Sharif to carry out their own investigation. Their report confirms many of the statements made in the film by Jamie Doran.

In the latest edition of *Der Zeit*, they write: "It is not difficult to find people in Sheberghan who can relate what took place in the desert of Dascht-i-Laili. Without exhibiting any degree of excitement they tell of executions and Taliban suffocated in containers."

The reporters quote the inhabitant of a nearby village, who said: “I counted at least 13 containers. They were transported on lorries. It was daytime when they arrived.” Asked how these men died, the villager responded: “We were told that they had suffocated in the containers, but some of the containers were splattered with blood.”

According to the report in *Die Zeit*, the local population was certain that the operation took place in the presence of American soldiers: “We enquired further. No one doubted that the Americans had taken part. Even at higher levels there are no doubts on this issue.”

Die Zeit, however, estimates the total of dead Taliban to be somewhat lower than the figure given in the Doran film.

Doran said that 8,000 Taliban surrendered in Konduz. He bases his figure on the statement given by the Uzbek commander who led the surrender negotiations. In an interview with the WSWS, Doran said: “8,000 surrendered to Amir Jahn, who negotiated the surrender deal. In the film he says he counted the prisoners one by one, and there were 8,000 of them. 470 went to Qala-i-Janghi. The assumption is that seven-and-a-half-thousand went from Qala-i-Janghi to Sheberghan, and the result of that transport was that, according to his words, “Just 3,015 are left. Where are the rest?”

According to the witnesses in the Doran film at least 1,500, but more likely up to 3,000, were massacred.

Die Zeit on the other hand speaks of “around 5,000 Taliban” who surrendered in Konduz, without accounting for the difference between their figure and that given by Doran. The paper estimates the number of victims at Qala-i-Janghi to be around 600, and the number of prisoners whose whereabouts remain unknown to be at least 1,000. The report concludes: “That a proportion of the 1,000 have disappeared, while others suffocated in the containers, is indisputable.”

At the same time, *Die Zeit* refers to a further slaughter involving the deaths of 570 Taliban. This “case of at the very least astonishingly ruthless conduct of war” actually took place in the town of Mazar-i-Sharif when it was occupied by troops of the Northern Alliance. Taliban fighters had hidden in the Sultan Rasia school in the middle of the town and were carrying out a bitter defence of their position. American air strikes were called in to break their resistance. After the action, the

Red Cross collected a total of 570 corpses.

The various reports emerging from Afghanistan present a horrific picture of a ruthlessly conducted colonial war. These accounts contrast sharply with the official image projected by the Pentagon and the media, and indicate that the US military is guilty of major war crimes.

There are increasing demands for a full and independent investigation of what took place in Afghanistan. The Physicians for Human Rights is demanding that the mass graves be protected to ensure no evidence is removed from the site or destroyed. The United Nations has also taken up this demand. However, neither the Afghan government nor Washington has responded to these calls. The European parliament plans to discuss the issue at the beginning of July.



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