

Why is the US media blacking out documentary on war crimes in Afghanistan?

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Massacre in Mazar, a documentary by Irish director Jamie Doran, was screened last week before select audiences in Europe. The film documents events following the November 21, 2001 fall of Konduz, the Taliban's last stronghold in northern Afghanistan. [See: "Afghan war documentary charges US with mass killings"]

The film presents powerful testimony from Afghan witnesses that US troops collaborated in the torture and killings of thousands of Taliban prisoners near Mazar-i-Sharif. The film, which has prompted demands for an international commission of inquiry on war crimes in Afghanistan, received widespread coverage in the European press, with major stories in the *Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *Sddeutsche Zeitung*, *Die Welt* and other papers.

This major story, however, has received virtually no coverage in US newspapers or on network or cable television. Aside from stories on some alternative Internet publications, and a June 16 article on Salon.com, the story has been essentially blacked out in the US.

A search for news about the documentary in the major dailies—including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Boston Globe* and the *Miami Herald*—turned up empty. Web sites for ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox News and CNN have likewise carried nothing on the film.

Repeated telephone calls by the WSWs to these news sources, inquiring why they have failed to cover the story, went unanswered. How is possible that not a single major US media outlet chose to cover such an important news event? There is no innocent or journalistic explanation.

This wholesale political censorship cannot be

justified on the basis that *Massacre in Mazar*—or the events it depicts—are not “newsworthy.” The two screenings of the documentary in Germany prompted calls by a number of European parliamentary deputies and human rights advocates for an independent investigation into the atrocities exposed by the film. Calling for an inquiry, prominent human rights lawyer Andrew McEntee commented 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.”

The film includes scenes of the aftermath of the massacre of hundreds of Taliban fighters who were taken prisoner outside Mazar-i-Sharif, at the Qala-i-Jangi prison, showing captured troops who were apparently shot with their hands tied. The filmmaker also interviewed eyewitnesses, who describe the torture and slaughter of 3,000 prisoners, who were allegedly driven to a desert area and massacred. These witnesses—who were not paid—have offered to provide testimony before any independent investigation into the events.

The film footage is so damning that both the Pentagon and the US State Department were compelled within days to issue statements denying the allegations of US complicity in the torture and murder of POWs, which are powerfully pointed to by the film. If the US government is so concerned over the implications of what the documentary exposes, why has the US media chosen not to report on it?

Since September 11, this same print and broadcast media has consistently toed the Bush administration's propaganda line; and there has been no shortage of coverage on the Afghan war. The government's flouting of international law and the Geneva Conventions in the treatment of Afghan war prisoners

at the Guantanamo Bay naval base in Cuba and proposals for secret military tribunals have gone virtually unchallenged. Assaults on the democratic rights of both immigrants and citizens—including secret detentions and suppression of protests—have been reported as legitimate aspects of the government’s “war on terrorism.”

One topic that has received short shrift in the American press is the civilian death toll in the US air raids in Afghanistan, which human rights advocates estimate at more than 3,500, not including the thousands facing death from starvation and displacement.

The well-known motto of the *New York Times*, “All the news that’s fit to print,” increasingly masks a practice by that newspaper and all the media of choosing to print only that which fits the war propaganda needs of the Pentagon and the White House.

The refusal of the press to report on the charges of US complicity in the torture and mass killings in Afghanistan shown in *Massacre in Mazar*—or even to acknowledge the existence of the film—serves one purpose: to keep the American people in the dark about the Bush administration’s military actions and human rights violations.

The media’s silence makes it complicit in what are horrific war crimes. It also provides an even more sinister service to the Bush administration. Filmmaker Jamie Doran decided to release a rough cut of his documentary before final editing because he feared Afghan forces were preparing to destroy evidence of the mass killings, scattering the remains of the victims. Self-censorship by the US media only facilitates such a grisly cover-up.



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