Evidence points to US cover-up of Afghan massacre

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Further information has come to light this week that undermines the credibility of the US military's account of its attack on the Afghan village of Kakarak. According to local officials, 54 civilians were killed and more than 100 wounded when an American AC-130 gunship opened fire in the early hours of July 1. Despite all its efforts, the Pentagon has been unable to bury the incident.

The latest revelations, based on a preliminary report written by UN officials who visited the village on July 3-4, were published in the British-based *Times* newspaper on Monday. Neither the report nor a later more comprehensive UN document has been made available publicly. But *Times* reporters saw a copy of the draft which, they explained, was produced by a team of "experienced and reputable UN people, who have been in the region a while and know it well".

According to the *Times* article, the UN team found "no corroboration" for allegations by the Pentagon that its AC-130 had been fired upon first from the village. Washington's claim that anti-aircraft fire was directed at its warplanes has been central to its justification for the attack. Villagers have insisted all along that the US gunship fired on a wedding celebration. Some of those involved, they say, may have fired small calibre rifles into the air—a common custom in rural Afghanistan.

As recently as last week, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld insisted that he had personally examined video footage taken from the AC-130. "Clearly, there was ground fire. There's no question of that," he declared, cautiously adding: "But I am not in a position to say that the muzzle flash was one type of weapon as opposed to another type of weapon." The Pentagon has not, however, released the video, thus blocking any independent analysis of its contents.

The draft UN document stated that there was clear evidence that human rights violations had taken place. The UN officials found that the coalition troops arrived on the scene very quickly after the air strike and "cleaned the area," removing evidence of "shrapnel, bullets and traces of blood". Some of the women in the village had their hands tied behind their backs.

The Pentagon has vigorously denied any cover up. US military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Roger King told reporters at the Bagram air base that US forces had not moved in to cleanse the area of evidence. King and other US officials have tried to cloud the issue by claiming that the removal of "blood samples, shell casings and shrapnel" was part of an official investigation by US officials.

The US investigative team, however, only arrived at the village several days after the raid. Those who entered the village immediately after the attack were part of a substantial US Special Forces group that had been observing the village. A number of villagers have already confirmed in media reports that US troops searched the village. A villager, Pir Jan, told the *New York Times* in an article published on July 8, that the soldiers had been "tying the hands even of the women".

However, evidence of a "cleanup" is new and has a particular significance. The US investigative team, which arrived in Kakarak on July 3, immediately claimed that the physical evidence at the site did not match the reported death toll. "There should be more blood. Where are the bodies?" they repeatedly said, according to accompanying journalists. The lack of bodies, villagers explained at the time, was because Muslim custom dictates that the dead are buried quickly. The lack of blood, it now appears, may have been due to the prior "cleansing" operation.

The US investigation is continuing. To date, it has failed to come up with any findings or to indicate when

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its work might be completed. Its purpose is not to make an objective assessment but to whitewash the massacre and defuse the issue. As one UN official commented to the *Times*: “The more it drags on, the harder it is to prove and probably the people investigating want it to go slowly and die away.”

The response of UN officials to the leaking of the draft report has been highly defensive. The UN mission attempted to undermine the document, saying that it contained judgements that had not been “sufficiently substantiated”. Fred Eckhard, the UN chief spokesman, said a comprehensive report would be released providing a more detailed and accurate picture. The final report has since been completed but has been handed over only to the US and Afghan governments. Eckhard denied that the US had exerted pressure on the UN to suppress the report, saying: “There is no sign or suspicion on our part of any cover up.”

The fact that the UN draft report has been kept under wraps for more than three weeks and the final version has not been released is an indication of just how sensitive the issue is. The massacre at Kakarak has already provoked a protest in Kabul and has intensified the resentment and hostility towards US forces among Pashtun tribes in the south and east of the country where the village is situated. The dismissive response of Pentagon officials to the rising civilian death toll has only added to the anger.

The Kakarak massacre is not an isolated incident. Yet, there is no official tally of civilian deaths caused by US bombing and other military operations. The Pentagon has refused to investigate most incidents or keep track of the number of people killed, maimed or left homeless. Unofficial estimates based on a careful analysis of media reports put the toll of civilian deaths in Afghanistan at over 3,000.

Global Exchange, a US organisation, has provided the first estimate of civilian deaths based on first hand investigations in Afghanistan. Its field teams conducted a comprehensive survey of four provinces—Kabul, Kandahar, Mazar-e-Sharif and Kunduzistan—and partial surveys of five others. According to their research, at least 812 people were killed in the first three months after the US invasion of Afghanistan.

The Bush administration reacted to the Global Exchange findings, which were first cited in the *New York Times* on July 21, with undisguised contempt. In a press conference the following day, Defence Secretary Rumsfeld declared that it was an “unfortunate fact of war that, inevitably, innocent civilians are killed... We can take some comfort in the knowledge that this war has seen fewer tragic losses of civilian life than perhaps any war in modern history”.

Previously, Rumsfeld and the Bush administration have been able to brush aside reports of civilian deaths. In the case of Kakarak, however, its threadbare explanations and bald-faced lies appear to be coming apart. The fact that the Pentagon has not been able to simply dismiss this atrocity out of hand is itself an indication that opposition is growing inside and outside Afghanistan to the US military occupation.

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