

A blatant cover-up: US releases report on Afghan massacre

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Two months after a US AC-130 gunship slaughtered participants at a wedding party in the Afghan village of Kakarak, the US Central Command has finally released an “unclassified executive summary” of the official investigation into the incident. According to the Afghan government, 48 people, mainly women and children, lost their lives during the attack in the early hours of July 1, and another 117 were injured.

The document released September 16 is a crude cover-up that fails to address any of the questions raised by the tragedy. The thrust of the executive summary is to minimise the incident, to justify the actions of the US military and to blame the victims themselves. No evidence is offered for any of its assertions nor is any attempt made to square the obvious contradictions between its statements and the accounts of witnesses and on-the-spot reporters.

The key element of the report is the claim that the US gunship came under fire from anti-aircraft guns stationed in a number of compounds in the Del Rawod area. The AC-130, which is a slow-flying, heavily armoured aircraft designed to attack tanks, unleashed its massive firepower on each of these positions. Most of the casualties were sustained in Kakarak where hundreds of people had gathered to celebrate a wedding.

Muhammad Shah, the brother of the bridegroom, described the circumstances to the *New York Times* on July 4: “People were singing, we were drinking tea, small boys were going around pouring tea for people... Three of us were drinking tea together in the courtyard when they first bombed. They killed my friend right where they were. Then we ran out of the compound and my other friend was killed.”

While rifles had been fired in the air as part of the celebration, the villagers denied that it had been directed at US aircraft or that there had been an anti-aircraft gun. Their evidence was ignored by the US inquiry which

simply repeated the claim that “AAA fire was directed at the AC-130 as it approached” the compound. The military have provided no proof for their assertion and candidly admit that their investigative team found no signs of a large calibre weapon in the area.

The summary stated: “A search of the first targeted compound, about two to four hours after the AC-130 had departed, revealed bloodstains and evidence of the AC-130 weapons impacts. There were no weapons or spent cartridges of any type readily observed within the compound.” Subsequent visits failed to reveal “the presence of any anti-aircraft weapons or even a significant presence of shell casings from any weapon”. The report noted that a fact-finding team found “two small piles of RPK rounds (about 12 total shells)”, but failed to indicate the location.

The report makes no attempt to explain the missing gun other than to insinuate that it was removed along with any ammunition and other evidence—with the complicity of the villagers. But those at the wedding party had no motivation for lying—many of them were close supporters of the US-backed Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who personally knew some of the dead. As Muhammad Shah told the *New York Times*, “We were the first to help Hamid Karzai, so we did not think they [the US] would bomb our village.”

On the face of it, the official account is absurd: Taliban fighters, with the assistance of Kakarak villagers, plant an anti-aircraft gun in the midst of a wedding party, fire on a US gunship which responds with a devastating barrage that kills nearly 50 people and wounds over a hundred. Yet in the midst of the mayhem, the gun, still presumably largely intact, is removed from the scene along with spent ammunition and any other signs of its presence. And all of the survivors lie to protect the Taliban.

There is, however, a far more obvious explanation and one that fits all the known facts. Kakarak had been

targetted as part of a sweep by US military forces through the Deh Rawod area. The report confirms that “covert reconnaissance” had been conducted for two weeks as preparation for “Operation Full Throttle” which began on the night of June 30. Between 300 and 400 US and Afghan troops were involved in the operation, some of whom entered the village shortly after the AC-130 struck the compound.

As a number of media accounts explained, the troops did not come to help the stricken villagers. They began searching houses and detaining “suspects”. A preliminary report by UN officials, who visited Kakarak on July 3-4, found that the detainees included a number of village women whose arms were tied behind their backs. Once the soldiers learned what had happened at the compound, they “cleaned the area,” removing evidence of “shrapnel, bullets and traces of blood.” The UN report was leaked to the media in late July but, following pressure from Washington, has not been made public.

The activities of the soldiers are in line with the stated purpose of Operation Full Throttle, which, according to the Central Command investigators, “was intended to deny Deh Rawod as an enemy sanctuary.” Their report is prefaced by the blanket declaration that the entire area “is considered the ‘home’ of the Taliban and remains an area where the Taliban enjoy popular support. The extended families of both Mullah Mohammed Omar, the former ‘Supreme Leader’ of the Taliban, and Mullah Berader, the former ‘Senior Military Commander’ of the Taliban, reside in the area.”

How 300 or 400 soldiers were intending to “deny sanctuary” to the Taliban in an area where they allegedly enjoyed “popular support” is not explained. But the answer is obvious. What was being conducted in the Deh Rawod area has all the hallmarks of the “search and destroy” operations that became notorious during the Vietnam War. Its purpose was not primarily to find Taliban fighters but to terrorise a population that is becoming increasingly angry over the continued presence of US troops.

Having targetted Kakarak for a raid in the middle of the night, all its inhabitants, regardless of their political affiliations, became the enemy. Any sign of opposition, real or imagined, was the pretext for a massive retaliation. The dead were either Taliban, Al Qaeda or their sympathisers. Any women and children who were killed were the unfortunate casualties of the conflict. The right of US soldiers to storm into a village in the dead of night was never questioned.

US Central Command’s “executive summary” reeks of the same contempt and arrogance for the lives of ordinary Afghan villagers that motivated the operation in the first place. The military was only compelled to initiate an official investigation because the Kakarak massacre provoked considerable anger and outrage in Afghanistan and internationally. Just days after the attack, the first anti-US protest took place in Kabul.

The inquiry, however, was never meant to be a serious examination of what happened in Kakarak. The investigators only travelled to the village twice—as part of a fact-finding mission on July 3-4, and then again when the Investigative Board returned on July 24. They went to only two of the six compounds reportedly struck by the AC-130. Given the time available, they could only have conducted cursory interviews with witnesses. All of this points to the fact that the inquiry’s conclusions had been decided in advance.

None of the media have challenged the outcome of the official investigation. In fact, the release of the “executive summary” has barely been covered in the international press, let alone made the subject of any probing questions.

In Afghanistan, however, news of the findings has provoked angry responses.

Abdul Rahim, district chief of Deh Rawood and a Karzai loyalist, told Associated Press that the findings were false. “America is a liar. Had there been any shooting from this area, why have they not seized arms and anti-aircraft guns? They searched all the houses, but not a single weapon was found. Not a single important suspect was caught. They should not use Al Qaeda and Taliban as an excuse to kill the innocent.”

Eight-year-old Jan Koko took a reporter to the site of the massacre. “Many women died here. I saw their heads smashed and their skull on their scarves,” she said. “My father was killed right here. My mother too. My whole house was full of blood. They even killed our cow.”

Abdul Kadir, 30, was also angry: “Almost every home here made a sacrifice. Either someone was injured or killed that night. The US has committed atrocities in this area. The US said its planes were targetted by gunfire. Why isn’t the world asking the US: where is its proof?”



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