

Newsweek exposé of war crimes in Afghanistan whitewashes US role

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The August 26 edition of *Newsweek* carries a special report entitled “The Death Convoy of Afghanistan.” An underline on the front cover of the magazine reads: “In November, America’s Afghan Allies Suffocated Hundreds of Surrendering Taliban Prisoners in Sealed Cargo Containers. *Where Were US Forces?*”

The report, which is substantiated by eyewitness accounts, establishes that US forces were on the scene when possibly more than 1,000 prisoners were killed. The article details how, in late November last year, Taliban prisoners who had surrendered to the Northern Alliance following the battle for Konduz were herded by the hundreds into sealed cargo-container trucks—without air or water—at the Qala Zeini fort, and left to die of asphyxiation and dehydration during the two- to three-day journey to the Sheberghan prison. Their corpses were then dumped and buried in a mass grave at Dasht-e Leili, just west of Sheberghan.

The *Newsweek* article provides a fairly detailed account of these atrocities, but does so from a very definite political standpoint—to lay the blame for evident war crimes entirely on the shoulders of the Northern Alliance, while exonerating the United States.

The revelations in the *Newsweek* article are the latest in a series of exposés of the methods employed by the US and its allies in the treatment of Taliban prisoners. The report corroborates the information in the recently broadcast documentary film, *Massacre at Mazar*, by Irish director Jamie Doran, which was shown to selected audiences in Europe in June. [See “Afghan war documentary charges US with mass killings of POWs: Showings in Europe spark demands for war crimes probe”] Doran’s film was blacked out by much of the American press, but provoked demands for an international inquiry into US war crimes by human rights groups and some European politicians.

The exposure also comes on the heels of numerous reports of the slaughter of prisoners overseen by US special operations forces at the Qala-i-Janghi prison in Mazar-i-Sharif in late November, in which at least 400 captured Taliban prisoners were killed. This massacre was most recently documented in a new CNN documentary [See “CNN documentary on Mazar-i-Sharif prison revolt: film footage documents US war crimes”].

Based on initial interviews conducted by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) with surviving prisoners at the Sheberghan prison, the *New York Times* and several other newspapers ran initial accounts of the events. The *World Socialist Web Site* published an article on the atrocity last December 13 [“More evidence of US war crimes in Afghanistan: Taliban POWs suffocated inside cargo containers”].

In the *Newsweek* report, it is clear that the authors began with a political agenda—to acknowledge the atrocities, while minimizing, if not entirely denying, the responsibility of the US. The authors admit that their investigation “has established ... that American forces were working intimately with ‘allies’ who committed what could well qualify as war crimes,” but then claim, “Nothing that *Newsweek* learned suggests that American forces had advance knowledge of the killings, witnessed the

prisoners being stuffed into the unventilated trucks or were in a position to prevent that.”

They make no attempt to reconcile the fact of direct participation of US forces with the Northern Alliance with the claim that the Americans were essentially guiltless—an assertion that flies in the face of the facts presented in their own report. Moreover, in its effort to exonerate the US, *Newsweek* is compelled to rip these events out of their actual political context, including statements at the time by US officials encouraging the killing of Taliban prisoners.

The *Newsweek* investigation was prompted by discoveries by Bill Haglund, a forensic anthropologist and archeologist, at the mass grave at Dasht-e Leili. He traveled there after investigators from the Boston-based Physicians for Human Rights interviewed surviving prisoners at Sheberghan, who told them of the killings.

Newsweek describes the death site at Dasht-e Leili: “Strings of prayer beads. A woolen skullcap. A few shoes. Those remnants, along with track marks and blade scrapes left by a bulldozer, suggested that Haglund had found what he was looking for.” Scavenging animals had brought gnawed bones to the surface, including some from recently buried bodies, still carrying tissue.

The gravesite measures at least an acre. In only a six-yard wide, five-foot deep trial trench dug at the site by Haglund and local laborers, 15 corpses were uncovered. Although Haglund won’t estimate the number buried, *Newsweek* quotes Aziz ur Rahman Razek, director of the Afghan Organization of Human Rights: “I can say with confidence that more than a thousand people died in the containers,” and were subsequently buried in the mass grave.

The victims—all young men—were “scantily clad, which was consistent with reports that [before they died] they had been in a very hot place,” Haglund commented. The bodies also showed no signs of gunshot wounds or blunt trauma, again consistent with survivors’ stories that the men died of asphyxiation. What were the events leading up to these men’s deaths?

The surrender of Taliban soldiers was set to formally begin on November 25. According to *Newsweek*, the majority surrendered “like sheep,” having been promised by Northern Alliance commanders, including General Rashid Dostum, that they would be allowed to return to their villages, a policy opposed by the Bush administration, particularly in relation to non-Afghan Taliban.

Newsweek spoke to a man they refer to as Mohammed, who was contacted at a container depot on the outskirts of Mazar-i-Sharif about this same time by soldiers from Dostum’s militia. They told him his container truck was needed to ship captive Taliban fighters to the Sheberghan prison. He arrived at the Qala Zeini fort that evening, and several other container trucks were already waiting inside. He estimates that about 150 Northern Alliance soldiers were on hand.

Mohammed describes how prisoners—including Afghans, Pakistanis, Arabs and Chechens—arrived at the fort in pickups and trucks and were herded into the containers. He says that most of them were bound by their

upper arms and blindfolded, and some were hogtied. In a scene reminiscent of crowds of European Jews being packed into cattle cars on their way to the Nazi death camps, the Taliban prisoners continued to arrive by the truckload over the next three days, with 150 to 300 packed into each container. As the doors locked behind them, they realized they would not be returning home, as promised, but were being left to die.

Prisoners in Mohammed's container cried out, "We're dying. Give us water! We are human, not animals." While Mohammed and some other drivers banged holes in their containers, allowing some of the men to survive, most of the prisoners were not so lucky.

Mohammed estimates that by the time the convoy set off from Qala Zeini there were 13 containers full of prisoners. Each driver had soldiers in the cab beside him. Another driver, referred to as Ghassan, told *Newsweek* that some prisoners in his container were alive, and beating on the sides. He was told by the Northern Alliance soldiers: "They just want water ... keep driving."

Newsweek writes: "By the time the trucks arrived at Sheberghan prison, many were ominously quiet. Mohammed was the driver of the second truck in line, but he got down from his cab and walked into the prison courtyard as the doors of the lead truck were opened. Of the 200 or so who had been loaded into the sealed container not quite 24 hours before, none had survived. "They opened the doors and the dead bodies spilled out like fish," he recounted. The following day, November 30, seven more container trucks of prisoners arrived; and on December 1, another seven. The drivers report that most of these contained dead bodies.

Truckloads of prisoners' corpses were brought to Dasht-e-Leili, where the ground was dug up, the bodies buried and the earth bulldozed over. Local residents report that Dostum's soldiers blocked any traffic by the site, in an effort to hide their activities. "No cars, no donkey carts, not even pedestrians were allowed to go down the road," one villager told *Newsweek*.

Where were US forces during the suffocation and mass burial of these prisoners? Despite *Newsweek's* contention that nothing in its investigation points to US complicity in the crimes, specific evidence in the report shows that US troops were on the scene during the surrender of the Taliban fighters, as the doomed men were packed in the containers, and as the dead arrived at Sheberghan.

The magazine writes that, according to Americans and Afghans there at the time, "dozens of American Special Forces troops" were on hand at Yerganak, a desert spot near Konduz where the surrender of Taliban soldiers was to take place. "Some of the Special Forces teams were zipping around the area on four-wheeler motorcycles; Dostum was filmed at the time enjoying a ride on the back of one," the magazine writes. US bombers also streaked overhead.

Newsweek points, in particular, to the role of the dozen-man 595 A-team, part of the Fifth Special Forces Group based at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. These A-teams "were the shock troops of the US assault on the ground and US firepower in the air," according to the magazine. *Newsweek* writes: "Over the three days that the first convoys of dead were arriving at Sheberghan, Special Forces troops were in the area. There was also a separate, four-man US intelligence team, in combat gear, at the prison doing first selections of Qaeda suspects for further questioning."

Newsweek also quotes one of the container truck drivers, Abdullah. Concerned over the prisoners' fate as they were herded into the air-tight containers, he contacted an acquaintance, Said Vasiqullah Sadat, who was working as a translator for the Americans. The following day, "a group of Americans arrived at Qala Zeini in two dust-covered pickups. But the containers were gone, and—says Abdullah—the Americans turned around and drove back to Mazar."

While Vasiqullah would not confirm to *Newsweek* that he informed the Americans about the containers, he told the magazine, "I think the Americans found out soon. They were at Sheberghan prison from the

beginning."

Newsweek's attempt to exonerate the role of US military and civilian authorities defies common sense. Since US troops first arrived in Afghanistan last October, the Bush administration has characterized the campaign as an American war against terrorism. Washington insisted that the US military was not intervening in civil war hostilities, but rather prosecuting a war against the Taliban, in which it enlisted the services of the Northern Alliance as its ally and proxy. The Americans were clearly in control.

At a news briefing on November 16, 2001 Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld described the role of US forces, and their relationship to the Northern Alliance, as follows: "The ones in the North have tended to be US Special Forces who are *embedded* in Northern Alliance elements and have been assisting them with communications to bring in food, to bring in ammunition, to bring in medical supplies, winter gear, and also to communicate with the overhead air power that the United States has been supplying" (emphasis added).

It should also be recalled that Afghanistan has been under intense military surveillance by the US military for months, with highly sophisticated electronic equipment being used to monitor troop movements and zero in on the smallest targets on the ground, including tunnels and caves. How could such an operation fail to detect the movement of a convoy of container trucks, the deaths of possibly thousands of prisoners and their dumping in an area guarded by Northern Alliance troops?

As recently as June, Department of Defense spokesmen denied any US knowledge of or participation in the events. Lt. Col. Dave Lapan commented: "Central Command looked into it and found no evidence of participation or knowledge or presence. Our guys weren't there, didn't watch and didn't know about it—if indeed anything like that happened."

At a Pentagon briefing on August 26, Marine General Peter Pace told reporters that the US military had "scrubbed the US side very carefully" and determined "that there have been zero reported cases of human rights violations by the [US] teams on the ground." The general also said the US has no plans to investigate the allegations, and sidestepped a question on whether the US would support an Afghan inquiry.

On the one hand, the US boasts of going into Afghanistan to hunt down terrorists, utilizing the Northern Alliance to prosecute its war. But when evidence of massacres and atrocities begins to emerge, the Bush administration claims it had nothing to do with it and could do nothing to prevent it. This is a double standard that is untenable in the face of the facts.

When events are placed within their proper political context, it becomes clear that the Northern Alliance was acting at the initiative of top Bush administration officials. White House spokesmen have repeatedly equated all foreign Taliban fighters with Al Qaeda, branding them as "illegal combatants" who are not protected under the Geneva Conventions.

In an appearance on the "Meet the Press" interview program on December 2, Rumsfeld described survivors of the prison massacre at Mazar-i-Sharif as "the last hard-core Al Qaeda elements," adding that "if people will not surrender, then they've made their own choice." In the week preceding the massacre at the Qala-i-Janghi fortress, Rumsfeld told reporters that he hoped what he referred to as Al Qaeda forces would "either be killed or taken prisoner."

Rumsfeld, President Bush and other US officials publicly declared their opposition to granting safe passage of foreign Taliban troops to Pakistan in exchange for their surrender. Rumsfeld stated on November 19: "It's our hope that they [Northern Alliance] will not engage in negotiations that would provide for the release of Al Qaeda forces; that would provide for the release of foreign nationals, non-Afghans, leaving the country and destabilizing neighboring countries."

On November 26, in the midst of the Kunduz surrender, Bush

commented: “One of our objectives is to smoke them out and get them running and bring them to justice.... I also said we’ll use whatever means is necessary to achieve that objective.”

The statements of Bush administration officials were so incendiary that even the US press took notice of their implications. The *Washington Post* wrote on November 23 of widespread concern in the Middle Eastern press that Rumsfeld’s comments amounted to “a ‘green light’ from the United States to kill so-called Afghan Arabs.” Comments appeared in the international press at the time arguing, justifiably, that statements emanating from Washington were tantamount to encouragement to the Northern Alliance to carry out the wholesale execution of non-Afghan prisoners.

Furthermore, Rumsfeld and others were making these comments at a time when it had already been documented that the Northern Alliance was carrying out the massacres of possibly hundreds of captured Taliban fighters, such as in the battle for Mazar-i-Sharif only two weeks before the prison uprising at the Qala-i-Janghi fortress. *Newsweek*’s contention that the US could not have known that further killings would take place is ludicrous.

Whatever the role of US troops on the ground, the proclamations of Bush administration officials made clear that the killing of Taliban prisoners was a matter of US policy.

In response to widely circulated reports of atrocities committed in Afghanistan—including the cargo container deaths and the slaughter of prisoners at the Qala-i-Janghi fortress near Mazar-i-Sharif—US authorities have been forced to provide at least a semi-official explanation of the events. The *Newsweek* report, most likely sanctioned at some level of the Bush administration, serves this purpose. It confirms much of what has already been reported about the cargo container deaths, provides some additional details, and then goes out of its way to sanitize the role of American forces. This is the classical *modus operandi* of a whitewash.

The timing of the report, moreover, suggests that it is bound up with growing tensions between the Bush administration and the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance. These strains increased in the aftermath of the assassination of Afghan Vice President Haji Abdul Qadir on July 6.

The assassination of Qadir, the second leading Pashtun in the Afghan government after President Hamid Karzai, was widely speculated to have been organized by Tajik forces inside the government. Following Qadir’s assassination, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad both paid visits to Afghanistan to meet with Karzai and Uzbek warlord Dostum, expressing their concern over the assassination and the inability of the Afghan government to control its factions. The US military has since taken over responsibility for President Karzai’s security, not trusting anyone within the Afghan government to organize it.

Unable at this point to deny that atrocities against Taliban prisoners have taken place, the Bush administration wants to deny any responsibility, while suggesting that the US will not defend Northern Alliance officials for their role in the crimes. Thus the *Newsweek* report has the character of a political warning shot by the US to its present allies in Afghanistan.

The *Newsweek* report establishes *prima facie* evidence of war crimes. It acknowledges the presence of US military personnel on the scene at various stages of the atrocities. Finally, statements by Donald Rumsfeld and other US officials demonstrate that the killing of Taliban prisoners was a matter of US policy. Taken together, these facts are sufficient to warrant, and in fact urgently require, a full and independent war crimes investigation in which officials not only of the Northern Alliance, but also of the US military and the Bush administration are prosecuted.



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