

German TV airs documentary charging American war crimes in Afghanistan

US State Department denounces broadcast

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21 December 2002

The US State Department has reacted angrily to the showing of a documentary on German television alleging that US soldiers were involved in war crimes in Afghanistan. The film, *Massacre in Afghanistan—Did the Americans Look On?*, was produced by Irish filmmaker Jamie Doran. It was shown December 18 on one of the main German public channels—ARD. The 45-minute documentary had previously been shown by the British Channel 5 and the Italian station RAI.

Prior to the German broadcast, a spokesman for the US State Department, Larry Schwartz, declared: “It is a mystery to us why a respected television channel is showing a documentary in which the facts are completely wrong and which unfairly depicts the US mission in Afghanistan.”

In fact, the allegations in Doran’s film have been public for over half a year and the US government has refused to make any statement or advance any argument to refute its detailed evidence of complicity by US soldiers in war crimes. The film makes the point that the Pentagon has refused numerous requests by Doran for an interview or comment on the events that it depicts.

A preliminary version of the film was shown to selected audiences in Europe in June of this year, as part of an effort by Doran to prevent evidence of the massacre from being destroyed and build support for an independent war crimes inquiry. Now Doran has incorporated his original footage into a full-length documentary that presents compelling evidence of US involvement in the massacre of thousands of alleged Al Qaeda prisoners, in contravention of all international laws and standards governing the treatment of POWs.

The film documents events following the fall of

Konduz, the Taliban’s last stronghold in northern Afghanistan, in November of 2001. It includes interviews with eyewitnesses to the torture and slaughter of some 3,000 POWs out of a total of 8,000 Taliban supporters who surrendered to US forces and allied Afghan forces led by General Abdul Rashid Dostun.

In the wake of the battle for Konduz, American military forces participated in the armed assault and killing of several hundred Taliban prisoners in the fortress of Qala-i-Janghi. The American John Walker Lindh was one of 86 Taliban fighters who survived the massacre by hiding in tunnels beneath the fort.

The film sets out to demonstrate that following the events at Qala-i-Janghi, in collaboration with its Afghan ally General Rashid Dostum, the American army command was complicit in the killing of a further 3,000 prisoners who were separated out from the total of 8,000 POWs and transported to a prison compound in the town of Shibarghan.

Prisoners were shipped to Shibarghan in closed containers lacking any ventilation. Local Afghan truck drivers were commandeered to transport between 200 and 300 prisoners in each container. One of the drivers participating in the convoy relates that an average of between 150 and 160 died in each container in the course of the trip.

An Afghan soldier who accompanied the convoy said he was ordered by an American commander to fire shots into the containers to provide air, although he knew that he would certainly hit some of those inside. An Afghan taxi driver reports seeing a number of containers with blood streaming from their floors. According to one of the drivers, survivors of the

transport ordeal were dumped in the desert near Mazar-i-Sharif. As 30 to 40 American soldiers looked on, those prisoners still alive were shot and left in the desert to be eaten by dogs.

In an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site* last June, Doran expressed fears for the safety of those who appeared in the film and those who helped produce it. In fact, two of the eyewitnesses to the events in Mazar-i-Sharif have since met violent deaths.

To underline the urgency of an independent investigation, the film broadcast December 18 included an interview with Najibullah Quairishi, the main Afghan researcher and filmmaker involved in producing the documentary.

Quairishi is shown on his sick bed with heavy bandaging on his head. He is nursing a fractured left arm. He was ambushed as he attempted to purchase additional film material showing the presence of American troops as the transportation and massacre of the 3,000 prisoners took place. Quairishi was in the process of making his own copy of the film when he was kidnapped and beaten up by thugs who were desperate to ensure that the incriminating footage did not get into the hands of foreign journalists.

Massacre in Afghanistan postulates that the 90-minute video offered to Quairishi was stolen on the orders of General Dostum, who is holding the footage in order to protect himself from possible prosecution. Should any attempt be made to implicate Dostum, the video would clearly indicate the close collaboration of American military forces in the killings.

For his own safety, Quairishi has since been forced to leave the country together with his family.

Doran emphasised in press interviews he gave December 16 in Berlin that it was urgent for international agencies to undertake measures to protect those appearing as witnesses in his film.

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The reaction of the American government to Doran's film has been a mixture of prevarication and bullying. The American media has exercised almost total self-censorship regarding Doran's film and the criminal activities of US soldiers in Afghanistan.

Initially the Pentagon issued a statement June 13 denying the allegations of US complicity in the torture and murder of POWs. The US State Department

followed with a formal denial on June 14.

Massacre in Afghanistan features footage of a press conference given by Philip Reeker on behalf of the US State Department. Reeker says that the department is looking into claims of human rights violations in Afghanistan, but regards such a problem as entirely a matter for the Afghani authorities with no implications for the activities of US soldiers.

Citing repeated refusals by the Pentagon and State Department to give interviews to the filmmakers or address their accusations, Doran concludes in his film: "One has the impression that the American government is seeking to prevent an investigation of the events by any means possible."

In the summer of this year a human rights organisation was able to exhume three of the bodies buried in the desert at Mazar-i-Sharif. It concluded that all three died of suffocation and that there was sufficient evidence to justify a full-scale inquiry. The United Nations eventually agreed to undertake security measures to protect the site of the killings. An official UN-led inquiry into the events is now scheduled for the spring of 2003.

As the film points out, however, major obstacles stand in the way of such an investigation. The area around Mazar-i-Sharif is controlled by the troops of General Dostum, who is the closest ally of America in the region. In an interview, Dostum concedes that he is "regrettably" not in a position to be able to guarantee the security of the witnesses.

Doran is determined to ensure the fullest distribution for his film. An additional 11 countries have bought the documentary and Doran is determined to push for a showing in America.



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