

Afghan Massacre—Convoy of Death available on video

Film exposing Pentagon war crimes premieres in US

Bill Vann
12 February 2003

A powerful film exposing the US role in the massacre of thousands of unarmed prisoners of war in Afghanistan was shown for the first time in the United States February 6.

The US premiere of *Afghan Massacre—Convoy of Death* was held at American University before a largely student audience. Made by Irish documentary filmmaker Jamie Doran, who was present for the premiere, *Afghan Massacre* has already been broadcast on national television in Britain, Germany, Australia and Italy, and rights to broadcast it have been sold to networks in a total of 24 countries.

Afghan Massacre is now available on video and can be purchased at the web site of Doran's film company, Atlantic Celtic Film Corporation at www.acftv.net. Brief video excerpts from the film are posted on Oneworld TV at <http://tv.oneworld.net/tapestry?story=584&window=full>.

After a rough cut of the film was screened before the European Parliament last year, it became the subject of articles and commentaries in virtually every major newspaper in Europe, prompting demands by human rights organizations and lawyers for an official investigation. In the US, however, the film has been subjected to a near-total blackout by the media and unremitting hostility from the Bush administration, which unsuccessfully pressured the German government to stop its broadcast in that country.

Official Washington's hostility is well founded. Doran's film provides irrefutable evidence that US forces in Afghanistan carried out a massive war crime. Working as a reporter for Japanese television, Doran covered the US-led siege of the Qala-i-Janghi fortress, where hundreds of captured Taliban prisoners were killed. Footage from the fortress included in the film presents the images sanitized out of US coverage of the event: the broken corpses of young Afghans killed by US air strikes and automatic weapons fire littering the grounds of the fortress—many of them with their arms still tied behind their backs.

The film reveals what took place after this assault. As Doran notes, while the US and most of the world media was focused on the death of a CIA agent and the capture of the so-called "American Taliban," John Walker Lindh, who barely survived the Qala-i-Janghi massacre, little attention was paid to the fate of the other prisoners. Some 8,000 Taliban fighters had given themselves up to General Abdul Rashid Dostum's Northern Alliance, which

functioned as a proxy army for the US during the Afghan invasion.

Some 3,000 of them were crammed into private container trucks commandeered by Dostum's forces. During a 20-hour drive to the Sheberghan prison, most of these prisoners died from suffocation in the airless containers. Witnesses interviewed in the film described how soldiers fired into the containers when the prisoners screamed for air and water. Others reported seeing blood dripping from the trucks.

Several witnesses recounted that US soldiers were present as the prisoners were loaded into the trucks and also when the container doors were opened at Sheberghan and hundreds of dead bodies spilled out. One soldier said that US troops in charge of the operation told their Afghan allies to "get rid of them [the bodies] before satellite pictures could be taken."

The final stage of this grisly operation was the transport of the dead and wounded prisoners to a barren stretch of desert 10 minutes up the road, called Dasht-i-Leili, where the bodies were unloaded and several hundred prisoners who were still alive were shot to death. Again, witnesses said US Special Forces troops were present during these executions and when bulldozers pushed the corpses into a mass grave.

The film begins and ends with the hideous scenes of this burial site, as well as a second one nearby, where the ground is littered with human bones, bits of clothing and shell casings. Doran has repeatedly demanded a speedy investigation into the massacre and action by the United Nations to protect the gravesites against an attempt to destroy the evidence.

Human rights experts have given great weight to the diversity of the witnesses interviewed in the film, including soldiers, truck drivers and other civilians representing a wide range of Afghanistan's disparate ethnic communities. Dostum's forces, however, have already murdered two of these witnesses, while others have been imprisoned and tortured.

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed the film's director, who came to the premiere in Washington direct from Afghanistan, where he had attempted to gain critical new material for a sequel to *Afghan Massacre* that he is preparing.

Doran was to meet a courier across Afghanistan's northeast border to purchase a videotape that includes footage of US troops at the scene of the mass killings. Afghan journalist Najibullah Quraishi, who collaborated with Doran on *Afghan Massacre*, was

abducted and nearly beaten to death in an earlier attempt to obtain the tape. The filmmaker speculates that General Dostum is intent on keeping the tape as an “insurance policy,” threatening to use it to expose the US role in the killings if Washington and the regime it backs in Kabul should attempt to deprive him of his power.

Doran said that the courier was detained by Uzbek militiamen who had told people in the area that they were searching for a man with a videotape. He has reportedly been tortured.

“How many more people will have to die before the government in this country admits what happened?” asked Doran. He stressed that it is a priority to protect the mass grave sites and establish a witness protection program for those who have testified as eyewitnesses to the war crimes. “If this country can propose to fly 500 Iraqi scientists and their families to Cyprus, then presumably they could bring 25 truck drivers out of Afghanistan,” he said.

Doran said that the evidence he has gathered, and which he will use in his upcoming sequel to *Afghan Massacre*, indicates that the responsibility for the war crimes in Afghanistan goes “as high as [US Defense Secretary Donald] Rumsfeld’s office.”

Within the US media, government efforts to suppress *Afghan Massacre* have thus far produced the desired results. Doran described the role of the American media as “pretty tragic.” He added that one American journalist who was following up the story recounted a conversation with a senior State Department spokesman. Asked why the story had yet to run in any major national daily, the spokesman replied, “You have to understand, we are in touch with the nationals on a daily basis. It just won’t run, even if it’s true.”

Doran said he was hopeful the film would soon be broadcast on US television and that in the meantime he was working on a deal that would bring it to at least 25 movie theaters around the country. Up to now, however, he has been repeatedly rebuffed by US broadcast media representatives, who told him that “the timing was not right” for the film. “First it was post-September 11, and then it was pre-Iraq,” he said.

The 46-year-old filmmaker, who has produced previous documentaries on subjects ranging from the disappeared in Chile to a retrospective on Stanley Kubrick’s film *2001*, stressed that he was not driven by political motives when he made *Afghan Massacre*. “I’m really not political, but they’ve tried to say I’m a communist and used McCarthyite tactics to try to make the story go away,” he said of the official reaction in the US. “But it won’t,” he added.

He said he was well aware of the significance of the film getting a wide audience in the US on the eve of another war. “I didn’t do the film because of what is happening in Iraq,” he said. “But the fact that it is now breaking into the American market may play a role in making American forces think twice before they are involved in anything similar in Iraq.”

Also present at the film premiere was Roy Gutman, *Newsweek*’s diplomatic correspondent and co-author of a story published last August covering the same incidents detailed in Doran’s film. This piece put the number of Afghan prisoners killed at less than a third the number reported by witnesses in the film and essentially whitewashed the role played by US forces in the massacre. “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,” the magazine reported. It followed up this statement with a series of hypothetical alibis for the Special Forces elements present at the scene, claiming that they must have heard “stories” about the killings, but “may have thought them exaggerated,” and that they “may have believed that the dead were war casualties.” [See “*Newsweek* exposé of war crimes in Afghanistan whitewashes US role”]

In a discussion period after the film showing, Gutman defended the *Newsweek* story, claiming that reports of American involvement in the massacre were “in a gray zone, extremely difficult to prove ... and when you’re not sure of the facts you have to put them in a special category.” He insisted that *Newsweek*’s policy was to make sure “every factoid” was completely verified before publishing. After facing challenges from both Doran and the audience, he fell back on the defense that his editors were ultimately responsible, adding that writing a magazine article was much like “making sausage.” He went on to criticize Doran’s film as overly “polemical.”

It is worth noting that Gutman rose to prominence in journalistic and government circles by applying a markedly different standard when, as a reporter for *Newsday*, he helped initiate the story about Serb-run “death camps” in Bosnia. For that coverage, Gutman relied heavily on second-hand witnesses and handouts from the Croatian and Bosnian Muslim regimes. As he told the magazine *Foreign Affairs* in 1993, he “consciously tried to move policy” with his stories, promoting a US intervention in the former Yugoslavia.

For Gutman and *Newsweek*, journalistic standards are highly elastic, depending upon whether it is the US that is accused of a war crime, or whether Washington is making use of war crime allegations to prepare military intervention against another country.

In the course of the discussion, Doran said that *Newsweek* had spent an entire day interviewing him and had called back to check facts the week before Gutman’s story ran, but in the end made no mention of him or his film. He also revealed that, after agreeing to give a copy of his film’s script to *Newsweek*’s correspondent in Afghanistan for “research purposes,” he discovered that the document had been copied and handed over to General Dostum shortly before he and his crew had returned to Afghanistan, placing their lives in danger. Gutman acknowledged that he had been given a copy of the script, saying it had raised “a number of red flags” for him.

Despite the attempts of the government and the media in the US to suppress his film, Doran expressed confidence that it will find an American audience. “They want this story to go away,” he said. “But it won’t until those American commanders responsible stand trial.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact