

In German TV documentary:

Afghan officials confirm US role in massacre of Taliban prisoners

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17 March 2003

On March 6, the German television programme *Panorama* presented fresh evidence implicating US troops in the massacre of Taliban prisoners during the 2001 war in Afghanistan. Shown on the ARD channel, the programme presented footage, including interviews with two Afghan government ministers who confirmed the presence of American troops during the transportation and killing of surrendered Taliban prisoners.

A documentary film made by Scottish director Jamie Doran—shown in an uncompleted form to members of the European Parliament and other selected audiences in Europe last June—presented the first public charges of American involvement in war crimes in Afghanistan.

Doran's film documents events following the November 21, 2001 fall of Konduz, the Taliban's last stronghold in northern Afghanistan. The film presents a series of witnesses who testify that American military forces participated in the armed assault and killing of several hundred Taliban prisoners in the Qala-i-Janghi fortress. Witnesses also allege that, following the events at Qala-i-Janghi, the American army command, together with troops of the Northern Alliance, were complicit in the killing and disposal of a further 3,000 prisoners, out of a total of 8,000 who surrendered after the battle of Konduz.

Hundreds of prisoners died of suffocation in the course of transportation in closed containers to the prison of Shibarghan. The transport finally ended in a stretch of desert known as Dasht-i-Leili, near Mazar-i-Sharif, where dead bodies were unloaded and several hundred prisoners who were still alive were shot to death.

The US State Department has consistently denied any

American involvement in the massacre of prisoners in the desert near Mazar-i-Sharif by forces loyal to the commander of the Northern Alliance, General Rashid Dostum. Dostum was the closest ally of American forces in November 2001 when fighting in Afghanistan reached its peak.

Following the showing of the rough cut of Doran's film the Pentagon issued a June 13, 2002 statement denying US complicity in the torture and murder of POWs. The US State Department followed suit with a formal denial one day later.

In December of last year, Doran's completed film *Massacre in Afghanistan—Did the Americans Look On?* was shown to German audiences. The film has already been shown in Britain and Italy and has been bought for showing in a total of 11 other countries. The American media has blocked virtually all coverage of the film and its allegations. The film was recently released, however, on video—titled *Afghan Massacre—Convoy of Death*, available from Doran's production company at www.acftv.net.

Prior to the German broadcast, a State Department spokesman, 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." Following the December transmission, State Department officials once again denied any involvement by US troops in the killing of Taliban prisoners.

Now the allegations raised in Doran's film have been confirmed for the first time by Afghan government officials. German reporters accompanied a small team representing the German parliamentary committee for

Human Rights to Afghanistan on a trip to investigate the background to the events in Mazar-i-Sharif. In the course of their research, the reporters were able to briefly interview Rashid Dostum, who now occupies the post of joint Deputy Defence Minister of Afghanistan.

In the interview, Dostum acknowledged that the killing of prisoners had taken place. He was not prepared to be drawn out, however, on the role played by US troops in these killings. Dostum shares the deputy post at the Afghan Defence Ministry with another general, Atig ullah Barialei, who was much more forthright and conceded that American troops were in attendance at this massacre.

Barialei stated in an interview with *Panorama* reporters at the Defence Ministry that, in his opinion, what had taken place in the desert was a war crime, and he confirmed that “at all the incidents which took place, American troops were present.”

Barialei’s charge was confirmed by Afghanistan’s Interior Minister Taj Muhammed Wardak. Wardak acknowledged that unarmed prisoners had been killed in an operation that he called an “accident”. Wardak went on to acknowledge that US troops were present during both the transportation and killing of the prisoners. Shortly after his interview with *Panorama*, Wardak resigned his post as interior minister for reasons that remain unclear.

In a comment for the *Panorama* programme, Christa Nickels, representing the German parliamentary committee for Human Rights, stated that she was convinced beyond any doubt that a massacre of prisoners had taken place. The prisoners had previously been disarmed, and their killing was in blatant violation of international law. She added that the statements made by Afghan government officials served to reinforce allegations that American Special Forces troops were present during the killings.

The United Nations had agreed to organise a fullscale investigation of the events at Mazar-i-Sharif this spring, but according to a representative of Physicians for Human Rights interviewed in the *Panorama* documentary, there is little chance of such a probe ever taking place. No agreement has been reached with the government of Afghanistan for the protection of those who would do the investigating, and the UN is displaying little willingness to ensure on its own that

suitable protection be made available.

Since Doran’s film was completed, two of the eyewitnesses who testified on camera to seeing US soldiers at the scene of the killings have themselves been murdered. Other witnesses and co-workers of the filmmaker have received death threats.

The *Panorama* documentary ends with recent footage of the desert where the massacre took place. There are indications of digging suggesting that an attempt is underway to destroy the evidence of a war crime. The film’s narrator warns that a forthcoming war in Iraq, with all its new attendant horrors, could serve to finally distract all attention from the involvement of US forces in the war crimes carried out at Mazar-i-Sharif.



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