

Rumsfeld in Mazar-i-Sharif

A war criminal visits the scene of the crime

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Donald Rumsfeld rode into Mazar-i-Sharif in northern Afghanistan last Thursday as part of his fourth trip to the war-torn country since the fall of the Taliban regime. The US defense secretary's 35-vehicle cavalcade rode into the desert town on a dusty highway alongside donkey carts and bicycles to meet up with two Afghan warlords for a two-hour visit.

Rumsfeld's appearance in Mazar-i-Sharif recalls one of the most gruesome episodes in the Bush administration's war on Afghanistan. It was here in late November 2001 that the US military led and orchestrated, with the assistance of Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum and his forces, the massacre of hundreds of Taliban soldiers following the fall of Konduz to the Northern Alliance.

The slaughter at the Qala-i-Janghi prison fortress was authorized at the highest levels of the White House and the US military. The six-day siege on the compound involved pounding US air strikes and the execution-style killings of prisoners shot with their hands tied behind their backs. Icy water was pumped into the prison, drowning and freezing to death those prisoners who had not been killed. By the time it was over, more than 400 were dead; perhaps as many as 800. Only an estimated 80 prisoners survived the attack.

US forces were also on the scene when another group of Taliban prisoners who had surrendered in Konduz, estimated at more than 1,000, were loaded at the Qala Zeini fort into sealed cargo containers—without air or water—and left to die of asphyxiation and dehydration during the two- to three-day journey to Sheberghan prison, also near Mazar-i-Sharif. Their bodies were dumped and buried in a mass grave at Dashi-e-Leili, west of Sheberghan.

That these atrocities occurred is not in doubt. They have been the subject of documentaries that include live

footage and the statements of eyewitnesses. [See "CNN documentary on Mazar-i-Sharif prison revolt: film footage documents US war crimes" and "*Afghan Massacre—Convoy of Death* available on video: Film exposing Pentagon war crimes premieres in US"]

In the early days of the Afghan invasion, White House spokesmen repeatedly equated all foreign Taliban fighters with Al Qaeda, branding them as "illegal combatants" who were not protected under the Geneva Conventions. This policy continues to this day with the US imprisonment of hundreds of alleged "terrorists" in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, the majority of them picked up in Afghanistan.

The US rejected efforts to negotiate a surrender in which Taliban soldiers would be allowed to give up their arms and go home, crossing borders to other countries, insisting that all foreign Taliban had to be imprisoned or killed. Rumsfeld himself made repeated statements calling for the killing or imprisonment of all captured foreign Taliban in Afghanistan. In the week preceding the massacre at Qala-i-Janghi, the defense secretary told reporters that he hoped what he referred to as Al Qaeda forces would "either be killed or taken prisoner."

Those killed in the US-led slaughter were mostly Pakistanis, Chechens, Arabs and other non-Afghans who surrendered in Kunduz, on November 24, 2001, to the Northern Alliance. The Geneva Conventions expressly prohibit discrimination against POWs on the basis of race, nationality or religion. Following exposure of the bloody events in Mazar-i-Sharif, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch called for an inquiry, and were joined by the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson.

The US and British governments have consistently rejected all such appeals, and no international judicial

body has called for an investigation or prosecution of those responsible. The US media, which paid only passing notice at the time to the slaughter of more than 1,000 prisoners of war in direct contravention of international law, fell silent in the immediate aftermath of the events. Similarly, Donald Rumsfeld's recent visit to Mazar-i-Sharif has not served as the occasion for journalists to recall the grisly episode.

However, Rumsfeld's appearance in the town where the Bush administration and US military oversaw the illegal slaughter does indeed constitute the visit of a war criminal to the scene of the crime—a crime for which no member of the Bush war cabal has been brought to justice.

Rumsfeld came to Mazar-i-Sharif to meet with Rashid Dostum and another warlord, General Ustad Mahammad Atta. Dostum and Atta joined forces to assist in the capture of Konduz on November 13, 2001, but their forces have since vied for control of northern Afghanistan, both politically and militarily. The provisional government of US-installed President Hamid Karzai controls a limited area around Kabul, in the south of the country. The US has called on the Afghan warlords to surrender their heavy weapons, and Rumsfeld received lukewarm assurances from Dostum and Atta in response to his request for this at their meeting.

In recent weeks the US has launched an intensified crackdown aimed at countering resistance faced by the occupation force in Afghanistan, which includes 11,500 US troops and 5,700 NATO “peacekeepers” in Kabul. A US air strike last Saturday 100 miles southeast of Kabul—aimed at assassinating a former Taliban official—claimed the lives of nine children playing on a field.

Secretary Rumsfeld took the occasion of his visit to Mazar-i-Sharif, two years after the city fell to the US-sponsored Northern Alliance, to issue a further death threat to the Taliban, commenting, “There is no doubt that those who have been defeated and removed would like to come back, but they will not have the opportunity: to the extent that they assemble in anything more than ones or twos, they’ll be killed or captured.”

The US has pursued a similar policy in its illegal war and occupation of Iraq, targeting former Baath Party leaders for assassination, and carrying out

indiscriminate raids and bombings of alleged Saddam Hussein strongholds, claiming the lives of civilians in the process.



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