

Court martial of British soldiers hears allegations of abuse orders

Mike Ingram
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The ongoing court martial of three British soldiers charged with abusing Iraqi civilians at an aid camp in southern Iraq has heard accusations of abuse that go beyond the current allegations.

Corporal Daniel Kenyon and Lance Corporals Mark Cooley and Darren Larkin are accused of indecency, assault and sexually humiliating Iraqi civilians at a storage depot outside the southern city of Basra in May 2003. The charges are based on photographs showing beatings and forced simulation of sex acts between Iraqi civilians held captive for looting.

Kenyon and Cooley deny the charges. Larkin, who is shown in one of the photographs standing on an Iraqi man bound in a cargo net, has pleaded guilty to one charge of assault, but denies two further charges of forcing Iraqi males to undress in public. The three argue that they were following orders from superior officers.

During the hearing this week, Major Dan Taylor, commanding officer of the camp—nicknamed Camp Bread Basket—came under heavy criticism from defence lawyers who accused him of being “prepared to let these soldiers be sacrificial lambs so your career can be saved.” Joseph Giret, counsel for Corporal Daniel Kenyon, made the statement after asking Taylor, “Are you prepared now to accept the blame for any part of the events that took place as a consequence of your order?”

The court martial heard previously that Major Taylor had ordered the Iraqi civilians, captured in a roundup of alleged looters, to be “worked hard.” This week it heard allegations that he ordered prisoners to be “beat” and “thrashed” and “given a good kicking.”

Regimental Sergeant Major Wilton Brown said Taylor had ordered soldiers to give the looters “a good thrashing,” but he claimed this meant “to get hold of

them and give them a hard time, work them as we brought them back in.” Testifying on Monday, January 24, Taylor denied using the word “thrash,” but admitted ordering that looters should be “worked hard.”

An earlier army investigation had determined that the roundup operation, nicknamed Ali Baba, was in breach of the Geneva Conventions, but had agreed no action would be brought against Taylor. On Tuesday, January 25, the court martial heard that Taylor had been called to a disciplinary hearing with Brigadier Nick Carter on January 14 this year. According to defence lawyers, Taylor is said to have telephoned several senior officers at the camp who will be called as witnesses at the court martial. Cooley’s lawyer suggested to Taylor that this was a way of “getting your story straight.”

Taylor has also been accused of destroying his notebooks a fortnight before the trial was due to take place because they “proved he was not telling the truth.” Taylor insists that he was merely “downsizing” due to relocation.

Taylor’s commanding officer, Colonel David Paterson, told the court he had not been briefed in detail about the mission to capture looters. “The looters were going to be rounded up at first light and then brought back into the camp,” Paterson said. “I had assumed they would then be handed to the Royal Military Police. Obviously, I now know they were not.” Under cross examination Paterson said that he did not know that “working” captured Iraqis was against the Geneva Conventions.

The court martial also heard allegations that former Sergeant Major Richard Jackson told soldiers that it was camp policy to punish Iraqi thieves. Jackson, who has since left the Army, allegedly took another soldier’s rifle and took potshots at Iraqis hiding in sand

dunes outside the camp in a “reckless and negligent” act.

Kenyon’s lawyer told Jackson, “I suggest that you did say to Corporal Kenyon that ‘we have a massive problem here and you will play a part in capturing them.’”

“You went on to tell them that ‘what we do when we capture these looters is give them a good kicking. That’s what we do and if you can’t handle that, then pass them back to me and I’ll sort them out.’”

Jackson denied telling anyone to kick the Iraqis or taking potshots.

As the military continue the pretence that the abuses stem from the actions of errant soldiers, or at worst from unclear orders from the commanding officer at the camp, it is becoming increasingly evident that the type of abuse pointed to in the photographs presented to the court martial is far from a one-off incident.

In an article published Sunday, January 23, the *Observer* newspaper reported that the army faces a new series of serious allegations of abuse in Iraq. The newspaper said that the Ministry of Defence had confirmed “that army prosecution lawyers have completed investigations into nine separate incidents involving British soldiers serving in Iraq and are now actively considering bringing charges on the back of their inquiries.”

According to the newspaper, three of the cases concern incidents involving the detention of Iraqis by British forces. Four involve the fatal shooting of Iraqis during military operations, and two more involve non-fatal injuries. A further 48 cases are still being investigated, while 77 cases have been examined and closed by army lawyers.

The *Observer* quoted a Ministry of Defence spokesman saying, “Nine cases are now complete and the army prosecution authorities are examining them.”

The same day, the *Independent on Sunday* reported, “At least 20 British soldiers are now facing prosecution after coming under ‘significant suspicion’ of involvement in the ‘deliberate’ abuse of Iraqi civilians.” The paper claims that in response to “detailed questions” the Ministry of Defence gave figures which “reveal that the total number of cases involving alleged abuse and negligence by British forces in Iraq has gone up from 12 to 16, and include two previously undisclosed cases against Royal Air

Force personnel.”

The fresh revelations prompted demands from Labour Party back-benchers and some opposition members of Parliament (MPs) for a full public enquiry into the alleged abuses. Welsh nationalist Plaid Cymru MP Adam Price said, “I think it is indefensible now not to conduct an independent inquiry in these circumstances. These are some of the worst and most serious allegations of abuse involving the British Army since the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya in the ’50s.”

Birmingham-based human rights lawyer Phil Shinner said, “Unless we have an independent investigation, then the figures will be hugely downplayed. While the military investigate themselves, that will be the case.”

Claims that the abuses are isolated incidents were further undermined by reports of charges being brought against a female intelligence officer and four military police sergeants from Denmark. The five are to face a court martial accused of mistreating Iraqi prisoners. The abuse is alleged to have occurred last year, when the five were stationed near Basra as part of a 500-strong contingent sent to Iraq.

With US, British and now Danish troops facing abuse charges, the source of these horrific acts clearly cannot be found in the minds of the individuals involved. Rather, they must reflect the brutality of the war itself. With all the false pretexts of weapons of mass destruction, Al Qaeda links and humanitarian concerns blown apart, the real aim of the war—the subjugation of the natural resources and the people of Iraq to the interests of US and British imperialism—has been revealed.

Moreover, evidence presented during the court martial that the British military paid no heed to the Geneva Conventions in regards to its treatment of Iraqi civilians—with senior personnel claiming to not even know its contents—must be seen in the context of the Blair government’s decision to flout international law in order to support a preemptive war of aggression.



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