

New evidence confirms killing of Afghan villagers by Australian soldiers

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3 June 2005

An article in the latest issue of *Time* magazine detailing an armed clash between Australian Special Air Service (SAS) soldiers and Afghan villagers in May 2002 has exposed as lies the previous accounts of the incident provided by military spokesmen.

At the time, US and Australian officials repeatedly insisted that Afghans killed in the gunfight were “enemy fighters”, “Al Qaeda” or “Taliban”, dismissing news reports that the dead were innocent villagers. The *Time* article, which is based accounts provided by the soldiers involved and largely uncritical of their actions, confirms, as the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time, that the SAS reconnaissance team blundered into a tribal dispute, provoking a confrontation that resulted in the deaths of at least 12 ordinary Afghan villagers.

The magazine’s blow-by-blow account completely accepts the standpoint of the US and Australian military that their troops could legitimately roam at will through Afghanistan and that any challenge to their presence was illegitimate. As far as the SAS were concerned, they were operating in “enemy territory”—completely ignorant of the local tribes, their languages, customs, allegiances or conflicts. Needless to say no attempt was made to consult tribal elders or in any way to make their presence known.

The purported aim of the spying mission, which set out on May 14, 2002, was to establish an observation post on a mountain top overlooking a suspected trail used by “large numbers of Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters” crossing the border into Pakistan. According to *Time* magazine, internal frictions plagued the six-man team. Having reached their objective, they discovered a gun emplacement and a large calibre machine gun and, assuming it belonged to the “enemy”, set up an observation post.

In fact, the gun emplacement belonged to the village of Bhalkhel, which was in a territorial dispute with their neighbours in the village of Sabari. While *Time* devotes

little coverage to the testimony of the Afghan villagers, an article three years ago in the *Christian Science Monitor* explained that the village rivalry over ownership of a contested mountain and its stand of timber had raged sporadically for 60 years. Given that Afghanistan has been torn by war since the late 1970s, it is not surprising that both sides were well armed.

The SAS mission was a disaster from the outset. Unit members claim that a man strolling up to the gun emplacement, spotted their observation post and “went for his weapon”. They shot him dead, provoking a protracted gunfight with local tribesman seeking to defend their village. The SAS soldiers assumed they were fighting Al Qaeda and shot dead at least two Bhalkhel villagers.

A second SAS unit which set out to rescue the besieged soldiers, reached the area at nightfall and called in the support of a US AC-130 gunship. By then, the shooting had alerted neighbouring Sabari tribesmen who thought they were under attack from their rivals and so opened fire as well. The AC-130 sent a number of laser-guided bombs into the Sabari bunkers, killing at least nine men. “I was sure I was fighting the Bhalkhel, so the last thing I expected was for bombs to fall from the sky,” Abdul Hassan told *Time*.

US and Australian officials repeatedly claimed that the dead were hostile fighters in “a known Al Qaeda stronghold.” Even after local tribesmen and Afghan officials explained what had taken place and demanded an explanation, Australian military spokesmen continued to stonewall. Asked in Canberra on May 21 if the clash had involved “some tribal minority”, Lieutenant Colonel David Tyler simply repeated that the SAS had come “under heavy and sustained fire in a known Al Qaeda stronghold.” The obvious implication was that anyone in the area was a legitimate target.

The whole incident would probably have remained

buried had it not been for recriminations within the SAS unit itself. The squad leader called for one of the soldiers to be disciplined for taking a turban and a rifle from a dead villager as trophies. The soldiers in turn accused the squad leader of making poor decisions. Following an internal investigation, several soldiers received what amounted to a reprimand and the matter was hushed up. But the bitterness continued and the squad leader applied for a discharge insisting there had been “a cover-up”. Some of those directly involved blurted out their side of the story to *Time*.

Apart from a few perfunctory articles, the Australian press has virtually ignored the latest revelations. The reaction is in line with its failure three years ago to seriously investigate the incident or to do more than uncritically repeat the statements of government and military spokespersons. In its article on Wednesday, Murdoch’s *Australian* newspaper expressed its astonishment at “the extraordinary claims” published in *Time* magazine, but much of the story was publicly available in 2002.

No one has called the Howard government or the military to account for their lying claims in 2002 or expressed the slightest sympathy for the Afghans who were butchered defending their villages. Prime Minister Howard has simply been allowed to employ what is standard operating procedure for his government: when one set of lies is exposed, replace them with a new concoction.

On Wednesday Howard publicly defended the SAS actions blandly declaring: “Nothing I have about this alters the fundamental fact that they took proper action consistent with the rules of war to defend themselves in anticipation of physical danger or death.” Labor opposition leader Kim Beazley parroted the same line, insisting that the SAS would “be merciful and absolutely check any contact to make sure that the contact was not inadvertently going to be an innocent [sic].”

But these rationalisations beg the question: what were the SAS doing there in the first place? The responsibility for the killings rests not so much with the SAS soldiers as with Howard government, backed to the hilt by Labor, in supporting the Bush administration’s criminal neo-colonial exercise in Afghanistan. On the pretext of its “global war on terrorism”, the US and its allies subjugated Afghanistan, provoking widespread hostility particularly in the tribal areas along the border with Pakistan. The fact that the SAS distrusted all Afghans and regarded the area as “enemy territory” confirms the lack

of any significant local support.

The rules of engagement for the SAS soldiers allowed for “incidental collateral damage”—including death and injury to civilians—as long as it was not “excessive in relation to direct military advantage anticipated to be gained”. But in an area declared to be “a known Al Qaeda stronghold” where there was no way of distinguishing between villagers and “Al Qaeda” or “Taliban”, the SAS treated everyone as an enemy. The slaughter of Afghan villagers was the inevitable consequence, legitimised in advance by the rules of engagement.

While defence officials in Canberra were insisting that the dead Afghans were “Al Qaeda”, the military in Afghanistan attempted to patch up relations. Sabari villagers told *Time* that the morning after the bombs fell US and Australian officers drove to neighbouring Zambar to apologise. “They promised compensation, says Haji Khannamuddin, but three years on, not a penny has been paid. He and other village elders say most of the men killed on the mountainside that night were fathers. They leave behind almost 50 children, with no means of support other than handouts from fellow villagers. It’s a terrible price to pay for somebody else’s mistake,” the magazine concluded.

Time magazine’s purpose is not, however, to get justice for the Afghan villagers or to criticise the continuing US-led occupation of Afghanistan. Rather, despite the bungled mission, the feature reads like a hymn of praise for the highly trained and specialised SAS killers able to operate in hostile territory for days or weeks on end with little or no support. But it does provide a glimpse into the SAS’s secretive dirty work carried out on behalf of the Howard government as part of the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and later Iraq.



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