

# Controversy continues over French soldiers' deaths in Afghanistan

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8 September 2008

Further information has emerged about the August 18 ambush that killed 10 French soldiers in Afghanistan and wounded 23 more in the valley of Uzbeen.

According to the August 25 edition of the satirical weekly *Canard enchaîné*, known for its exposures of governmental falsifications, four soldiers were captured by Afghans at the beginning of the fight and then “executed.” In addition, the newspaper claims that the Afghan translator accompanying the soldiers had “disappeared” a few hours before the patrol, an indication of the possibility of an ambush that was simply overlooked by commanders.

French Defence Minister Hervé Morin immediately issued a denial of the *Canard enchaîné* report, and government Spokesman Luc Chatel said that “an inquiry procedure is underway.” General Christian Baptiste, deputy spokesman for the Defence Department, told radio station *France-Info* that the missing translator had in fact died during the fighting, but did not explain why his death was not reported with those of the other soldiers.

French Army Chief of Staff General Jean-Louis Georgelin proudly replied that the soldiers “didn’t just let it happen to them.... [W]e lost ten men but the insurgents lost eight times more [during the attack and during operations on the following days]”. He was echoed by General Benoît Puga on August 28, who said the “adversary...took a beating,” adding that he considered the mission to be a success despite the losses.

The operations on the following days at Uzbeen killed tens of civilians according to the *Pajhwok* news agency.

US military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Rumi Nielson-Green cold-bloodedly dismissed concerns about Afghan civilians killed in the fighting. She said that she was not “completely certain” that those killed were involved in the attack on the French. “They were certainly at a minimum complicity,” she added, without giving any evidence.

Joel le Pahun, father of Julien le Pahun, one of the 10 soldiers killed in the attack, declared to *RTL* radio station on August 29 that he was “shocked” by the words of the generals and denied the mission could be considered a success, concluding “the real question is why did they die?”

A broad majority of French people oppose the war in Afghanistan. While American and NATO forces have cited the “war on terror” as a pretext for the invasion and occupation of the country, it has in fact been bound up with definite geo-strategic interests of the US and European ruling elite.

Seeking to head off popular anger following the death of the soldiers, President Nicolas Sarkozy reacted energetically to news of the attack, immediately flying to Afghanistan. He made the exceptional move of allowing families of the soldiers to visit the battlefield where they died.

The *Canard enchaîné* article is the second press revelation regarding the deaths. Shortly after the ambush, the media reported that French authorities did not initially mention that the soldiers had to wait four hours before receiving support. There were also suggestions that the deaths may have been the result of friendly fire.

French deputies will vote September 22 on whether to maintain French troops in Afghanistan. However, the Socialist Party (PS) has already responded to the public uproar by reaffirming its commitment to the French deployment in Afghanistan. PS chairman François Hollande said he wanted to avoid the dilemma between “complete withdrawal or sending more troops,” which he said was synonymous with a “quagmire.” PS foreign policy expert, and candidate for the leadership of the party, Pierre Moscovici said on August 24 at the *Fête de la Rose*, a traditional PS event, “We want to fight terrorism as much as the right-wing.”

PS member Jean-Louis Bianco, close to former

presidential candidate Segolène Royal declared on August 20, on his own blog, “In 2001, it was about fighting the Taliban regime and helping to rebuild the country.” This seems to imply some kind of hijacking of the operation by US interests. He does not elaborate, however, and simply advocates some changes to the strategy.

French Communist Party leader Marie-Georges Buffet declared her sympathy both for the families of the victims and for the French Army. Questioning Sarkozy’s strategy but not French involvement, she declared, “We must fight the fight against the Taliban,” and asked for a debate “on the objectives of French presence in Afghanistan.”

Indeed, the muted criticism from the French Socialist Party is entirely hypocritical, given that French involvement in the occupation of Afghanistan was initiated by PS prime minister Lionel Jospin. The only prominent PS member to question the involvement itself was Henri Emmanuelli. He declared in the daily *Le monde*, “Who is Karzai, a puppet put in power by powerful backers?” He appears to be wanting to give the impression that he is only just becoming aware of the facts of the situation, saying disingenuously, “I believe a lot of things are hidden to us about reality in Afghanistan.”

As for Nicolas Sarkozy, he has already promised that French involvement in Afghanistan will be increased. He declared this on August 27, at the opening of the ambassadors’ conference, a three-day meeting between the government and the ambassadors of 180 countries. Sarkozy said that the world was entering “a radically new era, for decades to come, which I would qualify as an ‘era of relative powers.’ ” In this era of “rare and expensive energy,” he said, “general interests are passing far behind the vigorous defences of national priorities.”

Regarding Afghanistan, Sarkozy went on to declare, “The new strategy of the allies, defined at France’s request at the Bucharest summit [the yearly NATO summit, which was held on April 2-4 this year] remains: a long-term engagement; a global approach, civilian and military; with an improved coordination of the aid” to the Afghan state. He warned, “A military withdrawal would trigger the return of the Taliban and Al Qaeda and probably the destabilisation of neighboring Pakistan.”

Further on, he made French commitment to the war in Afghanistan even clearer, saying, “I wanted to place France, frankly and neatly, in her Western family, restore a relation of confidence with the people and leaders of America and renovate our relation with the Atlantic Alliance.”

The French establishment’s viewpoint was clearly put a week earlier in the right-wing daily *Le Figaro*. Luc de Barochez wrote in his August 20 editorial that for France, “the issue is to give evidence of transatlantic solidarity. It would be wrong to see this as a hasty gesture towards the Bush administration as it draws to a close. Because, in the Afghan crisis there is a convergence of interests between both sides of the Atlantic. If Barack Obama and John McCain are united on any issue, it’s this one: Afghanistan is the central front of the struggle against terrorism; it will remain so in the coming years.”

De Barochez went on to insist that Europe “must seize the opportunity to prove its capacity to deploy its military forces in a sensitive region. The French involvement has long been ambiguous, just limited to the defence of the capital, Kabul. President Nicolas Sarkozy has restored its sense by placing our contingent alongside our allies, where the going is tough.”

With such demonstrations of allegiance, the French ruling elite has to find a way to accustom the French people to the inevitable casualties. The funeral held at the Invalides church in Paris was such an attempt, with Sarkozy declaring, “Losing life this way is also a way to achieve something in life.”

Foreign Minister Kouchner declared bluntly on TV, “Of course, we must expect more dead.” He called the operations in Afghanistan “police operations,” the same words that were used for the French colonial war against Algeria that lasted from 1956 to 1962.



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