

Australian SAS units function as death squads in Afghanistan

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An Australian Defence Department (ADD) report published in October, and highlighted on November 26 by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Lateline" program, provides a rare account of the shameful operations being performed by the Australian military as part of the US-led occupation of Afghanistan.

The units most involved are from the Special Air Service Regiment (SAS) and the Fourth Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (4RAR), the Army's designated commando battalion. These are highly trained troops and their ostensible role in times of war is to carry out long range reconnaissance, surveillance, harassment or raids on enemy targets. In the so-called "war on terror", they are being used as little more than death squads.

The ADD report presents the findings of an inquiry into a September 17 Australian operation that resulted in the mistaken killing of Rozi Khan, the pro-occupation governor of Chora district in Uruzgan province and a long-time colleague of Afghan president Hamid Karzai. The intended target, codenamed "Musket" by the Australian military, was an alleged member of the Islamist Taliban movement. While much of the mission statement remains censored, it is apparent that a squad was sent out to storm into the man's house in the dead of night and execute him in cold blood.

The possibility for things to go wrong is inherent in such operations in civilian areas, and on September 17, they went terribly wrong. Just days before the hit on "Musket" was ordered, the Taliban had issued threats against residents of a village, which lay on the route being taking by the Australians. Rozi Khan had encouraged the villagers to resist any attack and promised to come to their aid with his armed followers.

As the Australian troops moved close to the village, sentries atop houses spotted them and assumed they were Taliban intruders. Within minutes, dozens of villagers were firing on the Australians from the east, west and north. Khan and his men, alerted by the gunfire, began moving toward the fighting, as did local Afghan police.

Troops in an Australian back-up unit, who had manoeuvred to try and flank what they believed to be Taliban, engaged Khan's group and, the inquiry found, most likely inflicted fatal wounds on the district governor. It was not until a police vehicle arrived that the Australians made efforts to communicate with the men they were attacking.

After realising their mistake, the Australian troops aborted their "Musket" mission—at the cost of two dead and five wounded Afghans. The Defence Department inquiry ruled: "That Rozi Khan was among the casualties is resultant of his unfortunate intervention into a complex situation, albeit with altruistic motives."

The September 17 mission was no isolated incident. It was part of a broader and ongoing operation codenamed "Peeler" that tasks the Australian special forces with "disrupting [i.e., killing or capturing] Taliban leadership or improvised explosive device facilitators".

Not all missions result in the target's assassination. Last month, the alleged Taliban "shadow" governor of Uruzgan, Mullah Bari Ghul, was detained in a raid that was most likely conducted by Australians.

Other missions result in massacres. On November 23, 2007, Private Luke Worsley of 4RAR was killed during an assault on a residence in Chenartu village in Uruzgan.

Because of the Australian fatality, details of the incident were made public. The target was Taliban leader Mullah Baz Mohammed, who was expected to be at the house that night.

Australian troops crept up under the cover of darkness, blew the outer doors off the housing compound and rushed in. They left the Daad family—three men, two women and one female child—dead on the floor. A neighbour, Faiz Mohammed, told *Time* magazine: "There was blood everywhere." Worsley was shot as he entered the house. Mullah Baz Mohammed was not there.

"Lateline" commented that the Defence Department report "prompts questions about the legality and the ethics of targeted killings, even in the dusty and chaotic battleground of Afghanistan".

Tim McCormack of Melbourne University, a professor of Humanitarian Law consulted by the program, provided reassurances. "International law is not pacifist law," he said. "It does allow the killing of enemy combatants and civilians who take a direct part in hostilities—just as it's also legal for the Taliban to hunt down an Australian SAS person or anybody on the Australian side or any of the allied side".

McCormack's remarks, however, serve only to obscure the essential issues. They ignore the thoroughly predatory and, therefore, criminal motives behind the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. The September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington were utilised as the pretext to deploy military forces into the desperately impoverished country with the aim of securing long term bases in the very heart of Central Asia, a region rich in untapped resources. Over the past seven years, the Afghan war has evolved into a component of the struggle for regional dominance between the US—supported at present by its European NATO allies—and Russia and China.

The existence of Al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan had nothing to do with the decision to send in troops. Not only did the Bush administration reject offers by the Taliban to hand Osama bin Laden over to a third country if evidence were presented of his involvement in 9/11, but virtually no steps were taken by the US military to prevent the bulk of Al Qaeda simply moving across the border into Pakistan's tribal agencies—where it has largely operated ever since.

Australia's involvement in the war was the result of the most cynical calculations. By sending troops to fight in Afghanistan and then Iraq, the former Howard government hoped to cement Washington's backing for a series of military operations that would secure Australian strategic and economic interests in the South Pacific, as well as a free trade agreement with the United States. The Rudd Labor government is continuing the same policy.

There is a stark difference—both politically and morally—between the activities of citizens resisting the invasion of their country and those of the invading army. Afghans are fighting for the right to determine their own future free from foreign domination. The Australian military in Afghanistan is an instrument of imperialist aggression. It is conducting a campaign of terror throughout Uruzgan province to force the population to accept a US puppet government.

One obvious parallel to the Afghanistan operation is the Vietnam War's Operation Phoenix. Over a five-year period, American and South Vietnamese death squads assassinated tens of thousands of Vietnamese on the grounds they were supporting the Viet Cong (VC) liberation movement. Only the most craven apologist for US imperialism would claim that such atrocities were "legal" on the basis that many of the victims belonged to the VC.

The Labor government repeatedly tries to ennoble the Afghan war with flowery descriptions of Australian soldiers as "heroes" who are "putting their lives on the line for the rest us". The truth is they are killing and maiming people, including entirely innocent civilians, of an oppressed country for a thoroughly reactionary, neo-colonial cause.



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