Killing of Afghan civilians covered-up by Australian military

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19 May 2009

Information has surfaced this month that the Australian military has covered up the role of Special Air Service (SAS) personnel in the killing and wounding of civilians in Afghanistan.

In July 2006, a car occupied by the relatives of Afghan parliamentarian Haji Abdul Khaliq was riddled with gunfire. His brother-in-law was killed, his wife blinded and four others suffered varying degrees of injury. One young woman had to have her leg amputated.

The incident occurred close to Tarin Kowt in Uruzgan province, the base of operations for a force of Dutch and Australian troops.

Local Afghan officials blamed the attack on an Australian patrol. Both the US and Australian military, however, denied that any operations had been taking place in the area. In February 2007, the head of the Defence Forces, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, testified before an Australian Senate inquiry: "We investigated it and we found no evidence of Australian troops involved in what was described as happening."

The new information, contained in a Defence Department investigation and brought to light by the Melbourne *Age*, reveals that an SAS patrol had been operating in the immediate vicinity of the incident. The patrol had reported a "contact"—the firing of its weapons at an alleged enemy target. A Defence source told the *Age* that the SAS was monitoring movements along the roads and might have opened fire on the Khaliq family vehicle, suspecting it was carrying Taliban insurgents.

Khaliq told the *Age* that local sources had said to him that the Australian troops gave no signal for the vehicle to stop and that its windows were clear, enabling them to see that its occupants included women. After pouring gunfire into the car, the SAS made no attempt to assist the wounded.

The *Age* claimed that it was "almost certain" this information was not passed on to Houston before he gave his testimony to the parliamentary committee, where he was questioned about the incident.

This beggars belief. If true, it means that relatively low-ranking Defence Department investigators made a unilateral decision not to inform the head of the armed forces or the then government of Prime Minister John Howard that Australian troops may have killed and maimed the family of an Afghan politician.

If false, it means that both Houston and the Howard government lied to the parliament in order to conceal the fact that Australian operations had resulted in the slaughter of innocent Afghan civilians.

The response of the present Labor government has been to ensure that no independent investigation takes place into the cover up. Instead, it has attempted to bury the issue by requesting that Houston arrange for the military to investigate itself and report back to the defence minister.

In general, such internal inquiries find that the responsibility for civilian deaths cannot be determined, or were the result of a tragic accident—the "collateral damage" of war.

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The reality is that the killing of civilians takes place in every war of occupation. It is one of the means used by the occupier to terrorise a population into submission. The illegal occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq have been accompanied by just such indiscriminate killings, along with collective punishment, assassinations, arbitrary detention and torture.

In Uruzgan province and other areas of southern Afghanistan, Australian special forces are at the forefront of a campaign of assassinations that has repeatedly resulted in civilian deaths.

In November 2007, the SAS killed three men, two women and a child during an assault on an alleged insurgent house. The intended target was not there. Last September, they shot dead a district governor and another man during another botched assassination attempt.

Australian forces are also accused of killing four civilians and injuring a number of others in January, during reprisal operations aimed at locating the insurgents responsible for the death of an SAS trooper. In February, they killed at least five children during a firefight with the Taliban.

During March and April, the Australian SAS reportedly carried a major operation in parts of Helmand province that resulted in the deaths of 80 alleged “Taliban”. In at least one case, it called in US air strikes on a civilian house where an insurgent commander was allegedly making a last stand.

This month, the military claimed that the SAS located and assassinated a local Taliban leader named Mullah Noorullah. The *Australian* explained on May 14 that the use of the SAS for targeted assassinations was “an Afghan variation on the Vietnam-era Phoenix Program”.

The Phoenix program involved the systematic murder of Vietnamese civilians suspected of supporting the Viet Cong (VC). In case after case, American special forces massacred men, women and children who were the family members of an alleged VC leader or innocent bystanders. Between 20,000 and 70,000 people were murdered and tens of thousands more were detained and tortured.

The same criminal methods were used in Latin American countries throughout the 1970s and 1980s by American funded and trained death squads to prop up pro-US rightwing dictatorships.

Australian troops, deployed in Afghanistan by the Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, are performing a similar role today, on behalf of the strategic and economic interests of Australian and US imperialism.

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