

Demands to curtail war reporting after raid to free New York Times journalist

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Controversy over the SAS-led operation to free a *New York Times* journalist held captive in Afghanistan is being used to make demands that will curtail any objective and honest reporting from the war zones created by British and US imperialism.

Times journalist Stephen Farrell and his Afghan translator Sultan Munadi were taken captive by Taliban supporters on Saturday, September 5, and held for four days near of the northern city of Kunduz. Farrell had gone to the area to investigate the massacre of at least 125 people in a NATO air-strike on hijacked tankers called in by German forces three days earlier.

News of their seizure had been blacked out until after the rescue attempt the following Wednesday morning.

According to reports, the Brown government had sanctioned the raid, which involved British forces being dropped by two US helicopters into the compound where the two were held.

Farrell was freed, but Munadi was killed. It is not known whether Munadi died due to British or Taliban gunfire, although Farrell in his account of the rescue reported hearing British voices moments later. British paratrooper John Harrison also died in the raid.

While Harrison's body was removed, Munadi's was left behind, causing outrage amongst Afghan journalists. Munadi had been shot three times in the head and chest. His body was eventually retrieved by local villagers, who apparently called the *Times* office in Kabul using Munadi's mobile phone.

A press conference attended by some 50 reporters from the newly formed Media Club of Afghanistan condemned Munadi's abandonment as "inhumane" and blamed his death on "reckless and double standard behaviour" by the international forces.

Anger was intensified by claims that the rescue mission was unnecessary. Subsequent reports from

various sources reported that negotiations had been under way for the two's release. The Afghan Interior Minister had asked 300 local elders to intercede with the captors, while Munadi's uncle was in communication with the local Taliban commander.

Munadi's father, Karban Mohammed, told the *Independent* that his son had telephoned him less than two hours before his death. He was confident he and Farrell would be freed by their kidnappers after the mourning period for those killed in the strike on the oil tankers.

"Sultan was sure of that," he said. "My son's words brought me so much happiness I felt maybe I could sleep for the first time in many nights. He seemed so confident that things were working out."

"Yes, I feel very angry about what happened. I feel sad and also angry. Sultan was killed for no reason at all."

News of the negotiations added to accusations that the British government had been too "gung-ho" in authorising the SAS operation in an attempt to restore confidence in the foreign occupation of Afghanistan, which is opposed by majority of the British population. The London *Times* cited an unnamed Western official stating that the operation was "totally heavy-handed. If they'd showed a bit of patience and respect, they could have got both of them out without firing a bullet. Instead, they ended up having one of their own killed, the Afghan killed and civilians killed."

In his report of his capture and release, Farrell expressed profound regret for the deaths of Munadi and Harrison, while stating that he was aware that his gratitude "wasn't, and never will be, enough."

Farrell has been the target for vitriolic attack by sections of the media and the military for being "reckless" and "endangering lives." Several have

suggested that he, and other journalists like him, should be left in future to their own fate. Given that Farrell had gone to investigate a truly “reckless” attack by NATO forces that had cost tens of dozens their lives, such claims are riddled with hypocrisy and deceit.

Farrell notes in his report that the moment he heard of the air-strike, “it was clear that this was going to be a major controversy, involving allegations of civilian deaths against NATO claims that the dead were Taliban.”

Farrell—a journalist for 20 years with a reputation as a war reporter willing to go the extra mile from his work in Northern Ireland, Asia and the Middle East (including in Iraq where he was kidnapped in 2004)—was right.

Initially it was claimed that only “armed Taliban” had died in the raids, and that no civilians had been injured. But within days these claims had unravelled—in part, at least, because of eyewitness accounts gathered by Afghans and reporters who had visited the local hospital and interviewed those affected. They confirmed that more than 100 people had been killed when a hi-jacked oil tanker became trapped in a river, and local people rushed with jerry-cans to get desperately needed fuel.

The air strike was ordered, despite the tankers presenting no threat to NATO forces. There is no doubt that news of this brutal war crime would not have come out if it had been left to the sanitised reporting of NATO.

The *Mail* questioned whether Harrison should have “died to rescue a gung-ho reporter.”

Max Hastings in the same newspaper suggested Farrell was a “zealot.”

“The real lesson of his experience is that journalists who report wars must do so at their own risk—and suffer the consequences of a misjudgement....

“In my days as a newspaper editor, had I been asked whether such a raid should be launched to liberate a correspondent whom I employed, I would unhesitatingly have answered, ‘No.’”

The *Telegraph* cited the comments of former Army commander Colonel Tim Collins that “Stephen Farrell would be wise not to crow too loudly about his experience because his incompetence has cost a life. Unfortunately in journalism you do come across people who believe they are infallible.”

In what can only be considered a veiled threat, the newspaper also quoted an anonymous “senior Army source” stating, “When you look at the number of warnings this person had, it makes you really wonder whether he was worth rescuing, whether it was worth the cost of a soldier’s life.

“In the future, special forces might think twice in a similar situation.”

The government is playing an open part in this dirty campaign, because it recognises its value in discrediting reporting not sanctioned and controlled by the armed forces. Foreign Secretary David Miliband criticised Farrell for ignoring “very strong advice” not to travel to the Afghan region where he was seized by militants.

Miliband stated, “He was obviously on the one hand very brave and on the other hand he went against very strong advice that it was extremely dangerous to be in that area.”



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