

Coverup of the German army's role in the Kunduz massacre continues

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During last Thursday's plenary session of the German federal parliament, in which a wide majority of deputies voted to continue the German military's operation in Afghanistan, Defence Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg made a statement about the recent massacre in the Kunduz region. Contrary to his earlier estimation of the incident, the minister declared that the bombing of two tanker lorries on September 4 had been "militarily disproportionate".

At a press conference on November 6, Guttenberg had wholeheartedly defended the order to bomb the lorries and definitively described it as "militarily proportionate". He conceded that a NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) enquiry might subsequently conclude that there had been "procedural mistakes" and "inadequate training of personnel in some areas", but he added that "Even if there hadn't been any procedural shortcomings, the air attack would still have been necessary."

His "reassessment of events" has been welcomed by many commentators and described by the *Handelsblatt* daily newspaper as "a 180 degree turn", but this is certainly not the case.

In his parliamentary address on Thursday, Guttenberg expressly gave his support to Colonel Georg Klein, who had ordered the air attack in the early hours of September 4. Although NATO assumes that up to 142 people—including numerous civilians and children—were killed in the air attack, Guttenberg emphasised that the colonel's decision had his "complete sympathy". Colonel Klein had acted "undoubtedly with the soundest understanding and conscience," he claimed.

According to Karim Popal, a Bremen attorney who grew up in Afghanistan, the number of victims is significantly higher. Having carried out his own investigations in Afghanistan, Popal asserts that the attack claimed 169 civilian victims—139 dead, 20 wounded and

20 missing. As a result of the attack, there are 163 orphans and 91 women have lost their husbands.

Nevertheless, the minister assured parliament: "I want to say quite clearly that Colonel Klein has my complete confidence ..." He claimed there were good reasons why Klein "made a subjective assessment of the military appropriateness of his course of action. And I repeat: Colonel Klein undoubtedly acted with the soundest understanding and conscience, as well as for the protection of all his soldiers."

The minister addressed himself several times to the soldiers and officers following the debate from the visitors' gallery of the parliament. Despite his reassessment of events, he said: "... however, I will not make any correction to my assessment of appreciation for Colonel Klein."

According to Guttenberg's reasoning, therefore, the greatest massacre perpetrated by the German military since the crimes of Hitler's armed forces was objectively unjustified but could indeed be justified subjectively. The person responsible for this "militarily disproportionate" action, which claimed so many victims, is accorded the minister's complete sympathy and unreserved support.

This absurd argumentation serves to continue the coverup of the real events. The minister fails to offer any evidence that the colonel acted "with the soundest understanding and conscience". All the facts known so far contradict such a conclusion.

The claim that the order for the bombing of the tanker lorries was given in haste and under conditions of immediate danger—i.e., to protect the soldiers—is not tenable. *Der Spiegel* magazine meticulously reconstructed the course of events, based on its own research and the report of the ISAF (NATO-led International Security Assistance Force) enquiry. This concluded with the following scenario.

Firstly, the hijacked tankers were moving away from the

German army's PRT (Provincial Reconstruction Team) headquarters towards the Kunduz River. If there had been any direct danger initially, it abated in the course of the operation. Having travelled almost seven kilometres away from the depot, both lorries became bogged down in a sandy river bed and immobilised.

Secondly, a US air force bomber equipped with night-vision technology observed the scene and sent live video images to the German base camp. It kept watch on the hijackers for several hours and was then relieved by two US F-15 fighter-bombers that continued transmitting live pictures. An increasing number of people could be seen on the video images. As this was happening, an Afghan informant telephoned the German colonel to report that the tanker lorries were stuck in the sand and the petrol was being distributed to villagers.

Thirdly, the fighter-bomber pilots asked the German troop command on two occasions whether their own forces had come into contact with the enemy and whether—in view of the large number of people around the trucks—it was required that they be buzzed or frightened away with low-level flights. Twice they received the false information that there had been contact with the enemy and they posed an immediate threat, although no troops had moved out of the German Kunduz base to assess what was actually happening at the river ford.

Der Spiegel commented that Colonel Klein would not have been permitted to order—on his own authority—an air attack in the absence of previous enemy engagement and imminent danger. The magazine added: “The criticisms raised against Colonel Klein in the ISAF report are hard-hitting. They lead to the conclusion that Klein lied to the pilots and that the bombing was ordered by issuing false information. Whoever reads the ISAF report carefully must get the impression that Klein wanted to kill.”

Defence Minister Guttenberg already knew about these facts at the beginning of November, when he defended the bombing of the lorries, describing it as “militarily proportionate” and unavoidable. Only when the systematic coverup could no longer be maintained was Guttenberg prepared to gradually adapt to the truth. Now he is declaring that the bombing was “militarily disproportionate”, although he continues to defend the army officer who ordered this excessively aggressive operation. Why?

The claim that Klein acted on his own authority without consultation with his superiors is hardly credible. Why has the brigadier general responsible for the German contingent in Afghanistan been replaced twice since the

massacre? On October 3, General Jörg Vollmer was relieved of his command and replaced by General Jürgen Setzer, who had to give way to General Leidenberger at the end of November. Leidenberger is primarily distinguished by the fact that he has worked for years as head officer at the Federal Intelligence Service (BND). What is being covered up here?

The fact that Guttenberg has defended the person who ordered the bombing, even though he distanced himself from the atrocity after details of the massacre of civilians became known, suggests that he was in accord with the aims and intentions behind the attack.

For years, leading military personnel—particularly commanders of troops operating in foreign countries—have been calling for the lifting of restrictions imposed on the army since its foundation in the 1950s. They demand greater freedom of action and less dependence on decisions reached by parliament. Moreover, they insist on being granted the same license to kill already given to the US, British and Israeli armies.

Like them, the German commanders want to have the right to carry out offensive operations and kill people they define as the enemy, without being held accountable.

Prior to his ministerial appointment, Guttenberg worked to increase the army's influence on the government. In 2007, he called for the appointment of a spokesperson on Afghanistan in the chancellery, in order to push through war aims and tactics in the face of growing popular opposition.

The systematic campaign to cover up the Kunduz River massacre reveals the determination with which the military leadership pursues and asserts its interests.



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