Kunduz massacre: What is the German government hiding?

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Ten weeks after the Kunduz massacre, the German government is still conducting a systematic cover-up. Details of the deadliest attack accounted for by German soldiers since the end of World War II only reach the public piecemeal, revealing ever-new contradictions.

On September 4, American fighter jets bombed two hijacked petrol tankers near Kunduz in northern Afghanistan, killing up to 142 people, according to NATO figures. Other sources talk of even higher casualties. The order to attack was issued by Colonel Georg Klein, the army commander in Kunduz.

Meanwhile, it is known that Klein insisted on attacking the two fuel-laden trucks without giving any warning, transforming the surrounding area into a fiery inferno, even though many people were there. The two fighter pilots had offered Klein repeatedly to warn the bystanders before the attack by conducting low-level flights.

From the outset, the German government has sought to cover up the extent and circumstances of the massacre. While there was reliable information on civilian casualties just one day after the raid, former Defence Minister Franz Josef Jung (CDU, Christian Democratic Union) persistently denied that civilians had been killed.

Jung later had to resign because of his policy of disinformation. But his successor, Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg (CSU, Christian Social Union), still defended the attack two months later as being "militarily appropriate," although at this stage there could no longer be any doubt about the high number of civilians killed. Guttenberg also had access to a confidential report from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which stated that the attack was not "in line with international law."

In late November, Guttenberg finally sacked the senior army commander, Inspector General Wolfgang Schneiderhan, and Defence Secretary Peter Wichert, because they had allegedly withheld important information from him. On December 3, he then revised his assessment of the attack in the Bundestag (parliament). The air raid had "not been militarily appropriate," said Guttenberg, referring to previously unknown reports now available to him. But he continued to defend Colonel Klein, who he repeatedly stressed had acted "without doubt to the best of his knowledge and belief."

What has remained completely in the dark in this farrago of lies and half-truths is what led Klein to order the attack. The official justification, that the Colonel had feared a suicide attack on the German camp in Kunduz, was completely implausible. The two trucks had been hijacked near the army camp, but had then moved several kilometres away before they finally got stuck in a sand bank in the Kunduz River, where they were stranded for several hours and were observed from the air. So there was no imminent threat.

This week, the German newspaper *Bild* published new information throwing a different light on the possible motives for the attack. According to this report, Klein discussed his course of action with at least five officers and non-commissioned officers who belonged to a secret unit codenamed "Task Force 47" (TF47). About half of this unit consists of members of the Bundeswehr's elite KSK unit ("special forces command").

The TF47, according to *Bild*, runs its own command centre in Kunduz, which is much better equipped to communicate with the American aircraft than the headquarters of the conventional forces. From there, Klein, who also commanded the TF47, led the attack.

The TF47, according to *Bild*, is tasked with "hunting down Taliban and terrorist leaders." On the night of the attack, a TF47 officer was on the phone approximately seven times with an Afghan informant, "who identified four Taliban leaders nearby the tankers."

If this is true, then many previously unresolved

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questions now make sense. The aim of the Kunduz bombardment was not to prevent an immediate threat to the German camp, but the targeted killing of suspected Taliban leaders. That would explain why Klein insisted on an attack without giving any warning, and why the German government has so desperately tried to conceal the true background to the massacre.

Under no circumstances does it want to make public the fact that the German KSK in Afghanistan, like its American and British counterparts, deliberately tracks down suspects and kills them. These elite units work closely with the intelligence services, with a denunciation or a baseless accusation often being enough to issue a death sentence that is then carried out. This is incompatible with German or international law, and it would also not be accepted by the German public.

The government therefore surrounds the activities of the KSK with unparalleled levels of secrecy. According to *Bild*, the journal produced by the KSK on its actions during the night in question is so secret that even the official NATO investigators were not able to see it, "with reference to the national German provisions of state secrecy."

The government has long deceived the public, claiming that there were no KSK soldiers deployed in Afghanistan. On November 13, 2008, the Bundestag had officially ended the mandate of the KSK within the framework of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), which was widely seen as meaning the withdrawal of this elite force from Afghanistan. In fact, under the guise of the ISAF mandate, it remained very active in the war.

This was known only to insiders. Asked by the *Tagesschau* news programme if this wasn't a "rip-off," the SPD representative on the parliamentary Defence Committee, Rainer Arnold, admitted, "In accordance with the ISAF mandate, and naturally in compliance with the rules, all the capabilities of the Bundeswehr [Armed Forces] can be used. This is also true for KSK soldiers."

Besides Arnold, all the other chairmen of the Defence Committee—a representative of the CDU/CSU, the Free Democratic Party (FDP), the Greens and Paul Schäfer of the Left Party—knew about the assignment of the KSK. Elke Hoff, the FDP chairwoman, confirmed this to the weekly *Die* Zeit. "The Defence Committee chairmen were informed about the participation of special forces commandos in the raid by the Ministry of Defence. There is no shortage of information to complain about," she said.

And it is this committee that is now supposed to investigate and clarify the background of the Kunduz massacre! That will be nothing more than a continuation of the cover-up campaign.

Firstly, in contrast to a normal parliamentary inquiry, the Defence Committee is obliged to maintain strict confidentiality. Even if its members were to uncover something, they cannot inform the public. They may not make notes, nor are minutes kept of its secret meetings.

Secondly, four of the five parties represented on the Defence Committee are deeply compromised by the war in Afghanistan. They are, so to speak, investigating themselves. The SPD and the Greens sent the army to the Hindu Kush in 2001; the CDU/CSU and the FDP want to keep it there today. Thus, none of them have any interest in bringing things to light that could strengthen the widespread opposition to the war in Afghanistan.

Unlike the other four parties, the Left Party is formally in favour of withdrawing the army from Afghanistan. However, it has maintained this position primarily in order to have a bargaining chip for future coalition negotiations. It has repeatedly made clear that it is not demanding an immediate withdrawal. By accepting the secrecy provisions of the Defence Committee, the Left Party also makes itself an accomplice to a veritable conspiracy against the people.

Paul Schäfer, who spent 18 years of his life in the Stalinist DKP (German Communist Party), was the Left Party's chairman in the Defence Committee in the previous parliamentary term and was well informed about all the secret details. Alongside him, three more Left Party deputies sit on the new Defence Committee: Christine Buchholz, until its dissolution into the Left Party a leading member of Linksruck (affiliated to Britain's Socialist Workers Party); Inge Höger from the union Verdi; and Harald Koch, who for 14 years was a member of the ruling Stalinist party in East Germany. They too will ensure that no information leaks into the public domain.

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