

US Special Forces covered up massacre of Afghans

Preparations advance for assault on Kandahar

Tom Eley
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A NATO military statement issued Sunday admitted that US Special Forces commandos carried out the execution-style killings of three women and two men in a February 12 night raid in southeastern Afghanistan. Among the dead women were two pregnant mothers, with 16 children between them. The third was a teenage girl. For weeks the US-led NATO officials had denied killing the women.

After the killings US Special Forces dug their bullets out of the dead women's bodies and treated the holes with alcohol to erase forensic evidence, an Afghanistan government investigation has reportedly determined. A United Nations official confirmed that the Afghan investigation found evidence US soldiers had tampered with the crime scene. These reports are substantiated by family members and local authorities, who say US soldiers blocked access for seven hours to the home in Gardez, the regional capital of eastern Paktia province, while they attempted to cover up the crime.

The US-led coalition, while admitting for the first time that its forces killed the women, now contends that it did not attempt a cover-up. "All regrettable," said Rear Adm. Greg Smith, the top military spokesman in Kabul, of the deaths. "That said, there is absolutely no evidence that the forces covered anything up." This is a bald lie. In fact, all the available evidence shows there was a cover-up, and a crude one at that.

Soon after the raid, NATO acknowledged that US Special Forces had gunned down two brothers, described as the local police chief and the district prosecutor, in their home. NATO conceded the men were civilians, but claimed, without providing evidence, that they were carrying Kalashnikov rifles.

NATO however denied that US Special Forces had killed the three women, claiming instead, fantastically, that they had been bound, gagged, and stabbed to death more than half a day earlier. Yet only a few hours before the killings the family had concluded a celebration for the birth of a new child, with 25 guests and musicians present in the home.

"In what culture in the world do you invite ... people for a party and meanwhile kill three women?" a senior Afghan official asked the *Times of London*. "The dead bodies were just eight metres from where they were preparing the food. The Americans, they told us the women were dead for 14 hours."

The NATO statement released Sunday abandoned this earlier statement, concluding "that the women were accidentally killed as a result of the joint force firing at the men." It did not bother to explain why the earlier

false story had been planted and now retracted.

Separately, the German government of Angela Merkel apologized for the killing of six Afghan policemen on April 2. The German military, which operates in Afghanistan's increasingly violent north, claims that the car carrying the men was obliterated by a German tank after it failed to stop on command. Three German soldiers had died earlier in the day in a gunfight with insurgents.

The episodes reveal the real nature of the occupation of Afghanistan, which has nothing to do with "defending" the local population or the US people against the Taliban or Al Qaeda. Its purpose is to assert US and NATO control over the strategically-crucial nation, the better to pursue Washington's interests throughout resource-rich Central Asia and block rivals such as China and Russia. This imperialist agenda inevitably requires the terrorization of the population.

The spate of civilian killings offers a glimpse of the bloody violence President Barack Obama has unleashed on the suffering country through his "surge." This will only intensify as the US makes preparations for a major military offensive against Afghanistan's second most populous city, Kandahar, which Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, has called "the center of gravity" for anti-insurgent operations. The attack is slated for June.

Kandahar's local government is ostensibly loyal to the Kabul regime of Hamid Karzai. The head of its council is Karzai's brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, who reputedly profits from the region's major industry, the narcotics trade. But vast sections of the city and its suburbs are under the de facto control of the Taliban.

Unlike the recent attack on the rural area of Marjah, operations in Kandahar will take place in an urban area of some 2 million people. The scale of the forthcoming violence is indicated by the recent decisions by UN and relief organizations to abandon the city for the safety of their personnel.

Prior to the full-scale military assault, efforts are being made to cajole, threaten, and bribe the local elite. The US is ordering a series of "shura" councils, at which elders from Kandahar's various districts and neighborhoods are being told that if they fail to eject the Taliban, they will face the American military.

These efforts are following a similar pattern as the Bush administration "surge" in Iraq. The alternative to cooperating with the Americans is

assassination. In preparation for the invasion, US Special Forces have reportedly carried out extra-judicial killings of close to 70 locals accused of links to the Taliban, and have arrested a similar number.

This self-styled “political” campaign faces several glaring contradictions, most notably the fact that the local Pashtun political elite are closely tied to both Karzais. Like Ahmed Karzai, their wealth and influence rests largely on the narcotics trade. Moreover, both Hamid and Ahmed Karzai owe their positions to the US invasion and the phony democracy established in its wake. It is this final contradiction that Washington finds most galling.

In a demonstration of their contempt for their own charade of democracy in Afghanistan, US officials are openly contemplating the assassination of Ahmed Karzai, who was elected to his position in a US gun-barrel vote, as a recent *Washington Post* news article reports. Hamid Karzai reportedly defied an ultimatum from Obama to sideline his brother by providing him with an international post.

A senior US military official told the *Post* of a recent conversation with Ahmed Karzai in Kandahar. “I told him, ‘I’m going to be watching every step you take,’” the official said. “If I catch you meeting an insurgent, I’m going to put you on the JPEL. That means that I can capture or kill you.” JPEL stands for Joint Prioritized Engagement List. Those whose names appear on it have been slated for execution by the US.

The *Post* article expressed frustration, however, that such a fate appears unlikely for Ahmed Karzai, at least in the short term. “As an elected official, Karzai cannot simply be removed from office,” the *Post* concluded.

The physical removal of Hamid Karzai, whose pro forma denunciations of US military violence have aggravated the Obama administration, is also under consideration.

Over the past two days, Karzai has once again become the target of a full-scale US media campaign. In the wake of the killings in Gardez, Karzai has reported to have asked US and coalition forces to cease house searches and said that he would consider joining the Taliban if western heavy-handedness continued. All of the major US newspapers quickly responded with articles Monday focusing on growing “frustration” in the Obama administration with Karzai.

This is the second media campaign against Karzai in half a year. In the recent disputed and fraud-ridden elections of last year, it was frequently hinted that Karzai might have to be eliminated. This possibility is now being openly articulated, Karzai’s main offense this time his hollow criticism of US brutality.

“To some it may seem as if President Hamid Karzai has a death wish,” a Monday comment in *Time* magazine notes. “The Afghan leader has lately begun sticking it to the U.S. and its Western allies—the only force protecting him from a surging Taliban, which hanged the last foreign-backed President when it reached Kabul in 1996.”

Yet Karzai must also contend with the overwhelming hatred of the US and NATO presence. “The wily President knows that the presence of foreign forces in his country is deeply unpopular, particularly when civilians are killed in the course of NATO military operations,” according to *Time*. “Karzai, moreover, is humiliated and shown to be powerless when his protestations over such operations are ignored by his Western patrons.”

Time points out that Karzai’s career as president has depended on the US and its calculations for the country. “It’s worth remembering that Karzai was essentially parachuted into the country in the course of the U.S. invasion, tapped to lead a new post-Taliban government” backed largely by warlords and “all manner of unsavory characters” funded by the CIA, which transported “hundreds of millions of dollars in suitcases” to Kabul.

The opposition to the US occupation is ultimately rooted in its predatory character, which has done nothing to improve the living conditions for masses of Afghan workers and peasants. This basic reality was highlighted by last week’s UN release of startling new data on social conditions in the country.

According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), fully 36 percent of Afghanistan’s population live in “absolute poverty,” and another 37 percent live only slightly above the official poverty threshold. Only a quarter of the population have access to safe drinking water.

“Poverty is neither accidental, nor inevitable; it is both a cause and a consequence of a massive human rights deficit,” OHCHR head Norah Niland said in Kabul on March 31.

The devastating effects of Obama’s surge are also reflected in a sharp increase in US and coalition casualties. At this time last year approximately 45 U.S. soldiers and 35 other NATO troops had been killed. So far in 2010, some 90 U.S. soldiers and 57 additional coalition deaths have been reported, almost twice the rate for 2009, the bloodiest year since the 2001 invasion.

The looming attack on Kandahar is being carried out in conjunction with stepped up drone attacks on the border provinces of North and South Waziristan in Pakistan. According to a report in the *New York Times*, 90 people have been killed in the attacks since January 1. The drones hover constantly overhead in the border regions and their CIA operators have become far less concerned over killing civilians close to alleged militants, striking fear into the entire civilian population, the *Times* boasts. These attacks, and Washington’s free admission that they kill civilians, constitute war crimes and are a violation of Pakistan’s sovereignty.

The drone attacks have only stirred bitter anger in the tribal regions and beyond, increasingly destabilizing the Pakistani government which consents to the killings. On Monday a series of apparently coordinated attacks killed at least 30 people in Northwest Pakistan. The most audacious was a sustained attack on the US consulate in Peshawar, during which six people were killed.

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