Leaked documents expose imperialist war in Afghanistan

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On Sunday, the WikiLeaks web site posted 91,731 American military documents on the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan, covering the period from January 2004 to December 2009. The release was timed to coincide with articles on these revelations in the *New York Times*, the British *Guardian* and the German weekly magazine *Der Spiegel*, all of which had received the documents several weeks ago.

The documents make clear that the occupation of Afghanistan is a filthy imperialist war. Popular resistance and protest demonstrations are drowned in blood, US death squads operate at will under a media blackout, and Washington and NATO collaborate with a narrow elite of corrupt warlords and Afghan officers.

The documents were released as the Afghan government confirmed that NATO rocket fire last week killed more than 50 civilians, largely women and children, in the Sangin district of Helmand Province. The attack was one of the worst since the May 2009 Gerani air strike, in neighboring Farah province, which killed 140 civilians, including 93 children and 28 women.

The WikiLeaks documents confirm the massive scale of US-NATO repression. By the American military's own classification, which downplays the role of US and NATO troops, the release includes 13,734 reports of "friendly action" by US-NATO forces. The number of Afghan attacks—there are 27,078 reports of "enemy action" and 23,082 of "explosive hazards"—shatters claims that the Afghan resistance is the product of a few Al Qaeda terrorists. There are 237 reports of popular demonstrations against the US occupation or US-controlled Afghan authorities.

These documents themselves are reportedly only a small selection of millions of US files uploaded to WikiLeaks databases. What has already been released, however, makes clear that the US military sees Afghan casualties as unimportant, to be dealt with primarily by relying on the Western media to conceal the scope of the killing from the populations in NATO countries and internationally.

According to one report, on March 28, 2007, Dutch forces fired on Chanartu, a village in Kandahar province that was reportedly under Taliban attack. They killed four and wounded seven Afghan villagers in an operation the report called "justified." It said the Dutch government had "engaged in a proactive public relations campaign to prevent political fallout here and in the Netherlands," explaining that otherwise Dutch soldiers might "hesitate" to fire on Afghans in the future. The killings were classified as the result of action by "enemy" forces.

Written from the standpoint of the US military in the heat of events, the documents often understate Afghan casualties. For example, the September 2009 Kunduz bombing—when German officers called in a US air raid on two fuel trucks, killing 142 Afghans, overwhelmingly civilians—is listed as having caused 56 insurgent deaths.

The documents contain countless reports of civilians shot for approaching NATO vehicles, or for failing to stop at checkpoints. This includes two instances in 2008 where NATO forces machine-gunned a bus—once by French troops, wounding eight, and once by US forces, with 15 casualties.

There are also repeated accounts of NATO forces repressing demonstrations, often in close coordination with local Afghan authorities. On May 11, 2005 a unit of Marines reported demonstrations in Jalalabad, in eastern Afghanistan. After requests for help from the regional governor, Din Mohammed, the Marines called in "AH-64s [Apache attack helicopters] for a show of force."

Under cover of air support, Afghan and UN forces moved against the demonstrators. Though the US military reported 37 Afghan civilians were killed and 10 wounded, it classified the Jalalabad demonstration as a "non-combat event" by "neutral" forces.

The documents also reveal the existence of Task Force 373—a covert, heavily-armed Special Forces death squad that mounts operations throughout Afghanistan, seeking to assassinate Taliban leaders. On the night of June 11, 2007, while trying to capture Taliban commander Qarl Ur-Rahman near Jalalabad, Task Force 373 was surprised by a friendly Afghan police patrol which shone a light on them in the darkness. The task force called in an air raid by an AC-130 gunship which blasted the policemen with cannon fire. Seven Afghan police were killed and four wounded.

One week later, Task Force 373 launched another mission, against Abu Laith al-Libi in Paktika province. The plan was to fire a salvo of six missiles at the village of Nangar Khel, where al-Libi was suspected of hiding, then send in troops to attack the village. Though they did not find al-Libi, they discovered that the missile strike had killed six adults, whom they described as Taliban fighters, and eight Afghan children in a madrasa.

On October 4, 2007, the task force attacked Taliban forces in the village of Laswanday, only 6 miles from Nangar Khel. During a pause in the fighting the Taliban slipped away. However, Task Force 373 called in an air raid, killing four civilian men, one woman, and one girl. Two teenage girls and a boy, as well as 12 US soldiers, were wounded. There are suspicions that some of the Afghan villagers were executed, as one of the men was found with his hands tied behind his back.

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Coalition forces initially put out a statement claiming US forces had killed several Taliban militants. A US contingent visited the village and sought to blame the deaths on the villagers. According to the leaked reports, they "stressed that the fault of the deaths of the innocent lies on the villagers, who did not resist the insurgents and their anti-government activities."

The documents also reveal growing NATO losses in the air, including numerous drones and even manned aircraft, with at least one F-15 fighter being lost over Afghanistan. In an April 2007 report, the US military cited reports that the Iranian government had purchased portable anti-aircraft missiles from the Algerian government and given them to Afghan insurgents. This has not been previously reported.

White House National Security Advisor James L. Jones denounced WikiLeaks' publication of the documents, saying Washington "strongly condemns the disclosure of classified information by individuals and organizations which could put the lives of Americans and our partners at risk, and threaten our national security."

He continued, "WikiLeaks made no effort to contact us about these documents—the United States government learned from news organizations that these documents would be posted."

While the US government is most directly exposed by the documents released so far, many more countries must be concerned over further material that might be released. Assange claims that WikiLeaks has extensive documents on the positions on Afghanistan of every country whose population is over 1 million—that is to say, all of the world's major powers.

The occupation of Afghanistan is broadly unpopular in countries throughout the world.

At a Monday press conference in London, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange said he had recently received more "high quality material" from military sources. The *Guardian* notes: "Washington fears it may have lost even more highly sensitive material, including an archive of tens of thousands of cable messages sent by US embassies around the world, reflecting arms deals, trade talks, secret meetings, and uncensored opinions of other governments."

Assange has come under intense pressure from the US and allied governments. The Pentagon proposed to send investigators to meet him on "neutral territory" and discuss his sources, but Assange refused. After the May 26 arrest of 22-year-old US military intelligence analyst Bradley Manning at US Forward Operating Base Hammer 22 miles outside of Baghdad, Assange went into hiding.

Manning is currently locked up in a US military prison in Kuwait.

The Australian government had briefly taken Assange's passport earlier that month, telling him it might be cancelled. Assange is Australian.

The *Guardian* writes that journalist "Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon Papers, said he thought Assange could be in some physical danger; Ellsberg and two other former whistleblowers warned that US agencies would 'do all possible to make an example' of the WikiLeaks founder."

The *Guardian* claims that, after a manhunt, it found Assange in a café in Brussels, where he had traveled to speak to the European parliament. He agreed that a team of *Guardian* reporters could access the reports, which were also sent to the *New York Times* and to *Der Spiegel*.

Asked about his security at a press conference at the Frontline club in London, Assange said: "As we all know, the United Kingdom is a surveillance state." He continued by saying he believed he had political support in the UK, so that it would be difficult "for me to be arrested or detained. I can't imagine that happening in this country, unless there was a miscommunication from the bureaucracy to the political leadership"—i.e., a decision by the British police or military to violate the authority of the government.

In fact, the main division is not so much between the pro-war Cameron government in Britain and the state machine, but between masses of working people internationally who oppose the war and governments and security forces who are determined to wage it.

Significantly, none of the publications who broke the story called for opposition to the war in Afghanistan. Indeed, the *Guardian* editorial called for its indefinite extension. It wrote that the revelations in WikiLeaks' documents meant that "this is not an Afghanistan that either the US or Britain is about to hand over gift-wrapped with pink ribbons to a sovereign national government in Kabul."

Sections of the US political establishment are pressing to use the WikiLeaks material to carry out a tactical shift in US-NATO war policy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan. US Senator John Kerry published a statement, writing: "However illegally these documents came to light, they raise serious questions about the reality of America's policy toward Pakistan and Afghanistan. Those policies are at a critical stage and these documents may very well underscore the stakes and make the calibrations needed to get the policy right more urgent."

Kerry is holding hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the Afghanistan war today.

The leaking of the documents has been accompanied by a campaign in the US press, denouncing the Pakistani government's support for Afghan warlord factions opposed to the Karzai regime in Kabul. Discussion has centered on the role of Lt. Gen. Hamid Gul, the former chief of Pakistani military intelligence—the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI).

The *New York Times* wrote: "Lt. Gen. Hamid Gul ran the ISI from 1987 to 1989, a time when Pakistani spies and the CIA joined forces to run guns to Afghan militias who were battling Soviet troops in Afghanistan. After the fighting stopped, he maintained his contacts with the former mujahedin, who would eventually transform themselves into the Taliban."

The *Times* continues, "more than two decades later, it appears that General Gul is still at work. The documents indicate that he has worked tirelessly to reactivate his old networks, employing familiar allies like Jalaluddin Haqqani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, whose networks of thousands of fighters are responsible for waves of violence in Afghanistan."

The US government is now accusing Pakistan, whom it publicly recognizes as one of its main allies, of supporting Afghan forces fighting the US. These accusations underscore the basic hypocrisy of the US intervention in Afghanistan. It is not about fighting right-wing Islamism or terrorism, but defending major US strategic interests and controlling the balance of power in the fast-developing Asian continent.

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Amid mass popular opposition to the US occupation in Afghanistan, Washington has been unable to shape an agreement between Pakistani-backed factions around Hekmatyar, Haqqani, and the Taliban, on the one side, and the Northern Alliance forces that prop up the Karzai regime in Kabul, on the other. These latter forces have historically been backed by Pakistan's regional rival, India, as well as Russia. However, a turn by US imperialism to confront Pakistan carries immense dangers—notably, a confrontation with China, Pakistan's most powerful ally in the region.

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