

Australian soldiers in Afghanistan post racist anti-Afghan comments

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Australian soldiers participating in the US-led occupation of Afghanistan have been caught posting racist videos and messages on the social networking web site, Facebook. Military officials and the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard have gone into damage control, hoping to avert protests, and other repercussions, in Afghanistan.

Last Thursday, Channel 7 News broadcast video footage found on the Internet, showing Australian troops blowing up a bridge in Afghanistan and laughing as nearby Afghan civilians were startled by the explosion. “Scared the f--- out of that mufti,” one soldier was heard saying on the video.

At least 12 soldiers posted foul and racist comments about Afghans, which included use of the term “raghead”. Other comments called for civilians to be “butt stroked”—slang for being beaten with a rifle—and some soldiers joked about shooting local people and running them over in military vehicles.

The soldiers also described Gillard as “f---ing ranga” [redhead] and Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd as a “tool”.

Chief of Defence Force Angus Houston described the comments as damaging to the reputation of Australian troops. “This flies in the face of what we are trying to achieve in Afghanistan,” he declared. “We are trying to win the hearts and the minds of the people.” Acting Chief of Army Major-General Paul Symon said the army was appalled. “I struggle to understand, with all the training that we do and with the quality of soldiers that we have, that that sort of language has been posted,” he told 7 News. “There will be thousands of

soldiers disgusted at what we’re looking at.”

Australian Defence Association executive director Neil James expressed concerns that the Facebook material would harm the war effort: “In counterinsurgency wars fought in the age of the Internet and social media, it’s just simply stupid to do anything that provides the enemy with propaganda... This type of posting on social media is not only disgraceful and unprofessional but also incredibly stupid.”

Government ministers feigned outrage. Defence Minister Stephen Smith said, “I condemn it absolutely.” He telephoned his Afghan counterpart, Abdul Rahim Wardak, to apologise. Smith later told the ABC: “I made the point to him that the chief of the defence force and the chief of army were investigating this matter and in all likelihood disciplinary proceedings would follow.” He insisted that the conduct of a small number of Australian soldiers had brought the armed forces into disrepute.

In reality, racist attitudes toward the Afghan population are rife throughout Australian military ranks, as they are in the occupation forces of every nationality. The material revealed on Channel 7 News provides a mere glimpse into the destructive impact of forcing young men to fight a neo-colonial war. During the Vietnam War, American and Australian soldiers were encouraged to view the Vietnamese population as sub-human. The term “raghead” used by the Australian troops in Afghanistan was originally coined by US forces in Iraq to dehumanise the Iraqi people.

Racist and contemptuous conceptions—as well as war crimes and atrocities—are the inevitable products of

imperialist wars of aggression. The occupation forces are confronted with overwhelming opposition from the population, and cease to distinguish between active combatants and civilians.

Tens of thousands of Afghan civilians have been killed during the past decade under the banner of the “war on terror”. In the wake of the Obama administration’s military surge, 2010 was the bloodiest year of the war. The occupation forces boasted of killing over 2,600 alleged resistance fighters and detaining over 4,000 between June and December alone. Many will have actually been civilians. The insight into Australian soldiers’ attitudes toward the Afghan people coincides with the details emerging about the murderous operations of the US 5th Stryker Brigade, 2nd Division “Kill Team”. (See: “Rolling Stone publishes photos of US war crimes in Afghanistan”)

The Labor government has been keen to attribute the leaked footage from Afghanistan to a few “bad apples” because it is deeply implicated in all the war crimes being carried out there. The US-Australian military base at Tarin Kowt in Oruzgan province is an integral part of the attempt to subjugate the Afghan population. Australian special forces are also heavily involved in the systematic assassination of alleged opponents of the occupation.

During a parliamentary debate last year, Prime Minister Gillard declared Australian troops would fight in the country alongside US forces for at least another 10 years, despite majority opposition among the Australian population.

After the initial round of government-military apologies for the Australian soldiers’ remarks, several high-profile figures defended and played down their actions.

Former armed services chief General Peter Cosgrove, speaking to a Liberal Party meeting in Melbourne, demanded that the incident be kept “in proportion”. He continued: “Some soldiers who have been silly in posting these silly disreputable comments are also putting their lives on the line for ordinary Afghans...

Remember that these kids are actually, by their deeds, showing that they see a worthwhile mission for which they’re prepared to accept that great danger.”

The Australian media was quick to pick up on Cosgrove’s line. In an editorial last Saturday, the *Melbourne Age* stated: “Soldiers are young and sometimes have not yet developed a mature world view. Being trained and required to use weapons against others can also produce an understandable desensitisation in some; it is one of the many unhappy by-products of war. But it is important that the boundaries between emotions and actions are enforced.”

The next day, the *Sunday Age*’s international editor, Tom Hyland, wrote an article titled, “Outbreak of hysteria when soldiers crack.” Hyland demanded less of a “brouhaha” caused by “journalists shouting to the world” about the racist comments. He scoffed at intimations there was a problem with the “culture” of the armed forces, “where soldiers swear and sailors drink.”

Such apologetics point to the awareness in ruling class circles that, notwithstanding the official denials, contempt for the lives and rights of oppressed people is actively cultivated in the training and deployment of an imperialist military.



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