

Photos released of atrocities by US “kill team” in Afghanistan

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The German news magazine *Der Spiegel* on Monday published photographs of atrocities carried out last year by members of a US Army unit in Kandahar, Afghanistan. One photo includes an American soldier smiling for the camera as he lifts the head of a dead Afghan civilian like a hunter after bagging his game.

Der Spiegel published three photos, but it and *Der Spiegel* TV have reportedly obtained 4,000 photographs and videos from a collection belonging to a suspected member of a US army “kill team.”

The unit—attached to the 5th Stryker Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division based at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington state—is charged with murdering civilians for sport, cutting off body parts for trophies, and planting weapons to make their victims look like insurgents killed in combat. Five soldiers—including the two in the published photos—are facing court martial proceedings for murdering three unarmed civilians and other crimes.

Two of the photos depict US soldiers posing with the half-naked and blood-soaked corpse of Gul Mudin, a 37-year-old farmer who was killed in front of his child on January 15, 2010. The killing occurred in the village of La Mohammed Kalay, near Forward Operating Base Ramrod in Kandahar. The third photo is a picture of the dead bodies of two other civilians, propped up back-to-back with their hands bound, positioned in front of a military vehicle.

The Pentagon and Obama administration deliberately concealed this evidence of US war crimes from the public in the US and internationally. The military judge in the court martial case prohibited the release of the photos, but they were leaked to *Der Spiegel* by an unknown source. A defense attorney for one of the soldiers in the case told the *Washington Post*, “The Army is spending most of their time investigating the

photos rather than the murder.”

Military authorities are reportedly bracing for an explosion of protests in Afghanistan and fear that the impact could even be worse than that which followed the release of photos depicting the sadistic torture of Iraqi prisoners by US soldiers in Abu Ghraib prison seven years ago.

On Sunday, the United Nations ordered its staff in Afghanistan on lockdown, *New York* magazine reported. Security contractor DynCorp sent an email to clients warning that the photos were likely “to incite the local population” as the “severity of the incidents to be revealed are graphic and extreme.”

“The images have an enormous potential here in Afghanistan,” one NATO general told *Spiegel Online*. “Experience shows that it might take a couple of days, but then people’s anger will be vented.”

In a statement released Sunday, the US Army said, “We apologize for the distress these photos cause.” It added that the actions in the photos are “repugnant to us as human beings and contrary to the standards and values of the United States Army.”

Such claims have little effect on the populations of Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan, which have been the victims of US military “values” in the form of drone attacks, nighttime raids and other military actions that have killed thousands of civilians.

NATO and US Army officials have been preparing for the publication of the photos for close to 100 days, *Der Spiegel* reported. US Vice President Joseph Biden recently discussed the case with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, as did US General David Petraeus, the head of NATO forces in Afghanistan.

“In dozens of high-level talks with their Afghan partners,” the magazine reported, “military leaders have sought to pursue the same strategy used by the US

diplomatic corps in the case of the sensitive diplomatic cables released last year by WikiLeaks. They warned those most directly affected and made preparations for the photos' appearance in the public sphere. This 'strategic communication' was aimed at preventing a major public backlash."

Concern over anti-occupation protests—rather than the exposure of US war crimes—has dominated US media coverage of the photographs. In an unabashed defense of the occupation, *New York Times* columnist Alisa Rubin complained Monday that publishing the photos would "provide fodder for the Taliban's efforts to persuade ordinary Afghans that the foreign troops fighting here are a malevolent force."

Spec. Jeremy N. Morlock, 22, and Pfc. Andrew H. Holmes, 19—the two soldiers in the photos—have been charged with premeditated murder for the death of Gul Mudin and two other civilians. Staff Sgt. Calvin Gibbs is accused of masterminding the killings, and two other soldiers, Spc. Adam Winfield, 22, and Spc. Michael Wagnon, 29, are also charged with murder.

Seven are facing lesser charges, including mutilating and posing with corpses, possessing photographs and body parts of victims, falsifying reports, drug use and assault and threatening fellow soldiers who reported their activities.

In testimony last November, Spc. Ryan Mallet, who witnessed the January 15, 2010 killing of the Afghan farmer, said soldiers called Gul Mudin over from a field and ordered him to lift his shirt. Morlock, Holmes's superior, then yelled out "Grenade! He's got a grenade, Holmes, shoot him!"

Holmes fired several rounds with a large squad automatic weapon as Morlock lobbed a grenade at Mudin. After the grenade exploded on Mudin, Staff Sgt. Kris Sprague, who is not charged in connection with the death, stood over the victim and fired two more rounds into his back.

"They made it look like the guy threw a grenade at them and mowed him down," *Der Spiegel* quotes Winfield telling his father in a chat on the social networking site Facebook.

In a second incident, on February 22, 2010, one of the members of the kill team who had been carrying an old Russian Kalashnikov assault rifle fired it before pulling out another gun and shooting 22-year-old Marach Agha, the magazine reported.

In a third incident, during a patrol on May 2, 2010, the team apprehended a mullah who was standing by the road and took him to a ditch, where they made him kneel down. Staff Sgt. Gibbs then allegedly threw a grenade at the man, Mullah Allah Dad, while an order was given for him to be shot, *Der Spiegel* reported.

The US military and the media have sought to portray the unit simply as a rogue outfit, whose actions do not reflect the character of the war itself. But such barbaric actions are the inevitable outcome of a colonial war, in which soldiers are tasked with suppressing a civilian population that is opposed to foreign occupation.

In Afghanistan, the US is employing counterinsurgency methods that have long been used by imperialist powers to terrorize and "pacify" a hostile population, whether in Malaysia, Algeria or Vietnam.

The individual soldiers involved in these acts must be held accountable. But their actions, as heinous as they are, pale in comparison to the murder of tens of thousands of Afghan and Pakistani civilians carried out by the architects of the war. Those officials in the Bush and Obama administrations and the Pentagon should be tried for war crimes.



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