

NATO admits killing BBC journalist in Afghanistan

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16 September 2011

The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) issued a statement last week, admitting that a US soldier shot dead BBC journalist Ahmed Omaid Khpalwak in Afghanistan in July.

NATO issued a routine statement September 8 expressing its condolences for the killing, but said its forces on the day had complied with “the laws of armed conflict” and had “acted reasonably.”

NATO released a two-page summary of its investigation into the incident on July 28.

According to a report in the *Guardian*, this summary asserts that NATO troops arrived at the offices of Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA), in the town of Tarin Kowt in the southern Uruzgan province, apparently in the wake of a suicide bombing attack by insurgents.

As the soldiers started to clear the building, they spotted a man “with something clinched in one of his fists and reaching for something on his person with his other hand.”

The report continued: “Based on the events of the preceding minutes the soldier assessed the actions as those of a suicide bomber who was taking steps to detonate an IED [improvised explosive device] that posed a lethal threat to numerous soldiers in the immediate area. He shot the individual with his M-4, killing him.”

The summary concludes with the sentence: “Ahmad Omid [sic] Khpalwak was killed in a case of mistaken identity. He was shot by US forces who believed he was an insurgent that fired on them with a weapon and was subsequently taking action to detonate a suicide vest IED.”

Khpalwak was found to be unarmed and the gunfire from the area appeared to have been fired by other US soldiers. He was shot 11 times. He was one of 19 people killed.

The Taliban took responsibility for the initial suicide attack, but denied killing Khpalwak. NATO only launched an inquiry after initial reports that Khpalwak had been killed by insurgents were questioned.

Khpalwak, 25, was married with a young daughter. He had worked for the BBC Pashto service as its stringer in Uruzgan province, as well as for an Afghan online news service. According to reports, he had taken a “hostile-environment training course” and been advised that, if confronted by foreign military, he should put his hands over his head and speak English.

Khpalwak spoke good English, but this did not save him.

According to *presstv.com*, ISAF Brigadier General Carsten Jacobson said Khpalwak was described by soldiers as “holding a gadget in his hands and reaching for something in his pocket,” but admitted that the “gadget” could have been a press card.

The BBC also speculated that what Khpalwak was likely holding in his hands was his press card.

During the heavy fighting that ensued from the NATO raid on the RTA offices, Khpalwak had taken refuge in a bathroom. Fearing for his life, he sent his brother, Jawid, two texts: “I am hiding. Death has come.” Then, soon after, “Pray for me if I die.”

His brother Jawid, said his family held NATO responsible for what occurred that day. “They thought he was a suicide bomber, but how?” Jawid asked. “He spoke English and would have been showing his press card.”

Jawid said he was still receiving threats after speaking out against the occupation forces.

“People are threatening me and my family. All ten of us are very scared of staying in Uruzgan because of this,” said Jawid.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists

(CPJ), 23 reporters and a media worker have been killed in Afghanistan since the country was invaded by US-led forces in 2001. Some of these have died as a result of NATO actions.

In September 2009, NATO soldiers rescued kidnapped British *New York Times* journalist Stephen Farrell from the Taliban, but his Afghan colleague, Sultan Munadi, a UK soldier and two Afghan civilians died in the operation.

The reporters had gone to a village that had been the target of a NATO air strike on two fuel tankers hijacked by the Taliban. The tankers exploded, killing a crowd of around 70 civilians, and anti-occupation sentiment in the area was running high.

In October 2010, kidnapped UK aid worker Linda Norgrove was killed by a grenade thrown by a US special-forces team in an apparent rescue attempt in Kunar province.



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