

Questions mount over US account of Afghanistan massacre

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Within 48 hours of the Pentagon's confirming the identity of the US soldier arrested for the massacre of 16 Afghan civilians, including nine children, there are mounting questions about the official explanation of the bloody events of March 11.

Nearly every fact asserted by US officials in Kabul and Washington has been challenged, either by the villagers where the massacre took place, by the Karzai government in Afghanistan, or by those acquainted with the arrested soldier, Staff Sergeant Robert Bales, 38.

The most important questions are those raised by the villagers who survived the rampage. They have been repeatedly quoted, both in Afghan government accounts and in reports published in the international press, as describing several uniformed American soldiers participating in the bloodbath, not the lone gunman described by the Pentagon.

In a meeting with Afghan President Hamid Karzai Friday, relatives of the victims reiterated their claims of multiple gunmen. Karzai told reporters, "They believe it's not possible for one person to do that," referring to the multiple killings in two adjacent villages in Kandahar province. "In four rooms, people were killed, women and children were killed, and they were all brought together in one room and then put on fire. That, one man cannot do."

US embassy and military officials have refused to respond to these charges, and Afghan officials said the Americans were not cooperating with the Afghan investigation into the atrocity. Sergeant Bales was shipped out of the country before Afghan officials could interrogate him, and the Pentagon indicated that his trial would be conducted on US soil—making it unlikely that the Afghan witnesses can participate except by video testimony.

The *New York Times* admitted that despite the US claims that a lone attacker was responsible for the massacre, "most Afghans see it as similar to the night

raids [by US special forces], including Mr. Karzai, who on Friday portrayed it as the latest in a long string of episodes in which coalition forces have killed Afghans."

Karzai described the American forces as "demons" and the burning of Korans earlier this month as "Satanic acts that will never be forgiven." He said the massacre in Kandahar province "was not the first incident, indeed it was the 100th, the 200th and 500th incident."

He told a press conference, "This has been going on for too long. It is by all means the end of the rope here."

Doubtless Karzai's reference to the "end of the rope" was an expression of his own nervousness over the likely fate of his beleaguered and unpopular regime, entirely dependent on the American forces whose atrocities he is obliged to criticize.

In a further indication of the Afghan population's hatred of the US-NATO occupation, the US military revealed that a 22-year-old Marine killed in Helmand province last month was shot in the back of the head by an Afghan soldier. This is the seventh acknowledged death of an American soldier at the hands of an Afghan "comrade" in the past six weeks.

The information on the alleged attacker released by US officials has been at least as dubious as their accounts of what took place March 11. For six days, the Pentagon sought to keep the name of the US soldier secret, an extraordinary and unprecedented act of political censorship that drew no criticism in the US media. Fox News finally made Bales's name public on Friday, and the rest of the media then followed suit.

Initial accounts attributed to military sources claimed that Bales had been having marital problems, that he had suffered a traumatic brain injury during a previous tour of duty in Iraq, and that he had lost part of his foot there in the blast from an improvised explosive device. He was also described as under additional stress because his home had just been foreclosed on.

Many of these details proved to be false. Both Bales's lawyer and local media in Seattle-Tacoma describe his marriage as apparently happy. There had been no "Dear John" letter from his wife Karilyn, as was initially suggested. The foreclosure was on a home that Bales and his wife were renting out, not the one in which she lived, although that home was put on the market for sale the week before the massacre.

Bales bought this home in 2005 for \$279,000 and it was going on the market as a "short sale" that would have left he and his wife \$50,000 in debt—a situation that is all too common for working class and middle-class homeowners in the United States.

The government account of the massacre was summed up by an unnamed official who told the *New York Times*, "When it all comes out, it will be a combination of stress, alcohol and domestic issues — he just snapped." As Bales's attorney John Henry Browne responded, "The government is going to want to blame this on an individual rather than blame it on the war."

The Obama administration and the Pentagon want to dismiss the massacre in Kandahar province as an aberration, the action of a "rogue" soldier, someone who inexplicably carried out actions at odds with the US mission in Afghanistan. The truth is that the March 11 massacre is a concentrated expression of the role of the US military in Afghanistan, and in every impoverished country bombed, invaded or occupied by American imperialism.

Bales, if he committed the actions which he is accused of perpetrating on March 11, is a war criminal who deserves trial and punishment. But the more important war criminals are those in the White House, the Pentagon, the CIA and throughout the US political establishment who are responsible for more than ten years of war in Afghanistan, and who are plotting new wars in Syria, Iran and elsewhere.



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