

US charges soldier with 17 counts of murder in Afghan massacre

Bill Van Auken
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The US government Friday officially charged Staff Sergeant Robert Bales with 17 counts of murder and other offenses in connection with the March 11 massacre of Afghan civilians, most of them children.

The killing spree, which took place in the Panjwai district of the southern province of Kandahar, has sharply escalated an already advanced deterioration in relations between the Afghan population and the US-led military occupation, now in its 11th year.

While until now, both US and Afghan officials had given the death toll in the murderous rampage attributed to Bales as 16—including nine children and three women—the 17 homicide charges indicated an additional victim. The official charges gave no explanation for the additional murder count, and press reports cited unnamed officials as attributing it, in one case, to the death of an Afghan severely wounded in the massacre and, in another, to the forensic identification of an additional set of remains.

Bales is also charged with having “assaulted and attempted to murder six other civilians” in the incident. At least three of these victims remain hospitalized. One of them is a six-year-old girl who was shot in the head and has not regained consciousness since being taken to Kandahar Hospital. She is not expected to survive.

The *Washington Post* quoted Col. Gary Kolb, a military spokesman in Kabul, where the charges were filed, as saying that the documents in the case state that Bales walked off his base “armed with a 9 mm pistol and an M4 rifle with a grenade launcher.”

According to the military’s account, the staff sergeant walked to two nearby villages and shot and stabbed to death at least 16 unarmed villagers. These included 11 members of a single family, who were slaughtered in their home. Afterwards, their bodies were dragged into one room, piled on top of each other and set ablaze.

The announcement made in Kabul states that Bales could face the death penalty, with a minimum sentence, if found guilty, of life imprisonment with eligibility for parole. The soldier is presently incarcerated in a maximum security military prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where he was taken after being spirited out of Afghanistan.

Bales, 38 and a 10-year Army veteran, had been in Afghanistan since December, his fourth combat tour since enlisting. His lawyer, John Henry Browne, has said that Bales did not expect to be deployed to Afghanistan and did not want to go. He had suffered serious injuries to his head and to his foot during a previous deployment in Iraq.

The filing of the charges officially confirms that Bales will be tried by court martial, in all probability at his home base, Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington state. This will no doubt further enrage Afghans, who had demanded that those responsible for the massacre be tried in Afghanistan.

In interviews with the AFP news agency Friday, residents of the village where the massacre took place reiterated their demand that the trial take place in Afghanistan.

“We want the prosecution of this American soldier in Afghanistan not in the US, because he committed the crime in Afghanistan,” said Haji Samad, an elder in the family that lost 11 members in the rampage.

Haji Noor Mohammad, who lost four family members in the massacre, said, “I want the prosecution of this US soldier in Afghanistan, not in the US.” Responding to reports that Bales’ attorney may mount a “diminished capacity” defense, claiming mental problems contributed to the killings, Mohammad asked, “If he is truly crazy and had lost his memory, then why is he appointed as a US soldier?... Why is he not admitted to the hospital instead?”

Under an agreement between Washington and the puppet regime of President Hamid Karzai in Kabul, US military personnel enjoy the same immunity from Afghan law as American diplomats. The trial of Bales in the US rather than Afghanistan is just one more indication of the semi-colonial domination that US imperialism exercises over the country.

Further distrust of the American prosecution of Bales is fed by statements from Afghan villagers that contradict the Pentagon’s claim that the massacre was the work of a lone “rogue” soldier. This was the view expressed to the *Wall Street Journal* by Mohammed Wazir, who lost his wife, four daughters, two sons, his mother, his brother, sister-in-law and a nephew in the massacre.

Wazir said that he did not believe a single soldier could have carried out the killings and stacked all of the bodies into a pile to burn them. The bereaved father said that he believes his two-year-old daughter, Palwasha, was burned alive. “I checked her body, and there were no bullet marks,” he said.

Villagers have testified that they saw several soldiers raiding the houses. They were convinced that it was another “night raid,” the hated practice of US special operations troops in Afghanistan of targeting the homes of suspected supporters and sympathizers of the resistance to the occupation, as well as assaults in the early morning hours that often end in killings.

The Karzai government has publicly asked for an end to this tactic because of the popular outrage it provokes. The US high command, however, has rebuffed this demand, insisting that it is essential to its counterinsurgency strategy. The Pentagon claims to have killed at least 4,000 “insurgents” in these raids.

These raids, as well as Taliban retaliation attacks, had driven many of the villagers away, according to the *Wall Street Journal* report, belying American claims that the special operations base was there to protect the population.

“The only people who have remained are those who couldn’t afford the expense of moving their families to the city,” said Mullah Baran, 38, whose brother was the first one killed in the massacre. “The Americans said they came here to bring peace and security, but the opposite has happened. Now, this village is a nest of ghosts.”

While the US media, searching for an explanation for the mass killings, has focused its attention on Bales’ mental state and the possibility that he was abusing alcohol, the Afghan villagers have a simpler explanation: revenge.

Villagers have recounted to multiple news agencies that just days before the massacre, after US troops were wounded by a roadside bomb near the village, they were threatened with deadly retaliation.

After the explosion, “The soldiers called all the people to come out of their houses and from the mosque,” Ghulam Rasool, a tribal elder from Panjwai, stated in an account given during a March 16 meeting with Karzai.

“The Americans told the villagers ‘A bomb exploded on our vehicle... We will get revenge for this incident by killing at least 20 of your people,’” Rasool recalled.

Another villager, Naek Mohammad, told the Associated Press that the men of the village were lined up against a wall and addressed by an American soldier through an interpreter. “I know you are all involved because you support the insurgents,” he recalled him saying. “So now, you will pay for it—you and your children will pay for it.”

It remains to be determined whether Bales acted alone in exacting such vengeance or together with other soldiers, as the villagers insist. Whatever the case, such barbaric acts are symptomatic not merely of the psychological condition of a single individual, but of the demoralized state of the entire US military after more than a decade of dirty colonial-style wars against hostile populations.

All of the attempts by US officials from Obama on down to portray Bales’ alleged actions as an aberration that “does not represent us” cannot conceal that the massacre is only the latest atrocity in a steady stream of crimes against the Afghan population. This includes the so-called “kill team,” members of which were recently tried at Joint Base Lewis-McChord for hunting down and killing unarmed Afghan civilians for “sport” and then cutting off body parts for trophies. Then there was the release in January of a video showing laughing Marines urinating on the corpses of slain Afghans, followed a month later by the burning of copies of the Korans, provoking nationwide rioting in which at least 30 people died.

The growing animosity between US occupation troops and the

Afghan population has been further fueled by a steadily increasing number of incidents in which members of the Afghan security forces have turned their guns on American and other NATO soldiers who are ostensibly their allies.

A survey released by the US Army itself last year pointed to the plummeting morale of American forces in Afghanistan. Taken after the Obama administration’s “surge” of 33,000 additional troops into the country had brought an intensification of combat, it also showed a sharp increase in mental health problems.

Between 70 and 80 percent of the troops surveyed said that they had seen a member of their unit killed, while slightly more than half said they had themselves killed an Afghan. Two-thirds said that a roadside bomb had gone off within 55 yards of them.

Only 46.5 percent of soldiers described their morale as medium, high or very high, compared to 65.7 percent in 2005. The decline was just as steep among Marines, falling from 70.4 percent in 2006 in Iraq, to 58.6 percent last year in Afghanistan.

Fully 20 percent of those surveyed reported psychological problems ranging from anxiety to depression.

Given the culture within the military, and fears that acknowledging low morale or mental issues can wreck a career, the survey undoubtedly underestimates the level of deterioration within the American occupation forces, which have been subjected to multiple deployments and thrown back into battle despite suffering from post traumatic stress disorder and other mental problems.

In the Bales case, as in so many previous atrocities in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the military aims to make the issue go away by prosecuting a “rogue” soldier. The reality, however, is that if Bales indeed acted alone, he was carrying out “freelance” the kind of mass killings that have regularly taken place at the hands of American forces in Afghanistan.

Moreover, the horrific slaughter in Kandahar is in the final analysis not merely the work of a single individual, but the end product of a demoralized army and a miserable military command that treats its own soldiers with contempt.

While if guilty as charged Bales deserves to pay for his crimes, the far greater criminals in the Bush and Obama administrations who have prosecuted a decade of war against defenseless populations in Iraq and Afghanistan still go unpunished.



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