

Afghanistan massacre: The product of a criminal war

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Since the naming last Friday of the soldier charged with massacring 16 Afghan civilians, the media has sought to make this horrific crime comprehensible by delving into the history and personal problems of Staff Sgt. Robert Bales, while studiously ignoring the criminal nature of the war itself.

Bales, who is being held at the US military prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, is charged by the military with walking away from his outpost in the Panjawi district in southern Kandahar Province in the predawn hours of March 11 and breaking into homes in two nearby villages, shooting, stabbing and killing the Afghans, nine of them children. In one house, he is said to have piled up his victims' bodies and set them on fire.

He is now universally described as a "rogue" soldier. President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. John Allen, have all issued formal statements assuring the world that Bales' actions do not reflect the values and attitudes of the US military. According to this official story, the only question to be answered is: what made him "snap"?

The factual basis of this story has been called into question by the Afghan villagers, the country's US puppet president, Hamid Karzai, and an investigative commission formed by the lower house of the Afghan parliament, all of whom have charged that the killing spree was the work not of a lone gunman, but of as many as 15 to 20 US troops. The parliamentary panel presented its findings over the weekend, which included the charge that two of the women slain in the massacre had been sexually assaulted.

Even if the US military's version of these bloody events is proven true, and Bales did act single-handedly, the fact that the overwhelming opinion

among Afghans is that a number of US troops were involved in the bloodbath is telling. Clearly, they do not see this as the act of a madman or a "rogue," but rather as an all too routine episode in a decade-old war and occupation that has taken the lives of tens of thousands of Afghan civilians.

The information about Bales that has emerged so far suggests a number of stresses and crises. He had joined the Army in 2001, within weeks of the September 11 attacks, but also after the downturn in the stock market ended a brief career as a financial investor.

He had been sent to Afghanistan last year after already serving three combat tours and being led to believe he would not be shipped back to a war zone. He had been passed over for promotion and faced significant financial problems, including being heavily in debt and forced to short sell his house. In Iraq, he suffered a traumatic brain injury, and his attorney has indicated that whether he is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder could prove an issue when he faces trial.

All of these factors are indicative of the conditions facing hundreds of thousands of members of America's "all volunteer" military after a decade of waging two simultaneous wars in the Middle East and South Asia. While the political establishment and both major parties routinely instruct the population to "support our troops" as a means of securing acceptance of imperialist war abroad, the reality is that these troops are viewed by the ruling elite as disposable commodities.

Just as the problems attributed to Bales are hardly unique, so the appalling actions he is accused of taking are by no means simply the product of a mental breakdown.

According to the Afghan parliament's investigators,

villagers saw a clear motive for the massacre—revenge. They testified that US troops had warned them they would face retaliation for bomb blasts that injured several soldiers. According to Bales’ lawyer, the staff sergeant had seen his friend’s legs blown off by a roadside bomb the day before the massacre.

Such acts of revenge were hardly unforeseen by the US military command. Just last month, in the midst of the mass upheavals triggered by the burning of copies of the Koran, Gen. Allen was shown on US television news addressing an assembly of US troops at a forward operating base in eastern Nangarhar province, where two US soldiers had been killed the day before. “Now is not the time for revenge, now is not the time for vengeance,” the general told them.

Acknowledging that the troops were gripped by “anger and a desire to strike back,” Allen implored them to “remember your discipline, remember your mission, remember who you are.”

These words were not chosen carelessly. Gen. Allen and the rest of the American high command recognized that the threat of American troops carrying out bloody acts of revenge stemmed not from the mental illness of one or another individual, but rather from the very nature of the war itself: a colonial-style occupation that has pitted the US military against a growing popular resistance that it has proven incapable of defeating.

Such acts of revenge—along with countless other, often more deadly, bombardments, night-raid massacres and other murderous acts—are an inevitable feature of the imperialist wars of aggression launched by the Bush administration and continued under President Barack Obama.

The corporate media, which played such a prominent role in promoting the lies used to justify these wars, now has no interest in analyzing what this latest massacre says about the war itself. Like the government, its main concern is to cover up such crimes, or, where that proves impossible, divert attention from their objective significance.

Staff Sergeant Bales and any other US soldier involved in the killing spree in Kandahar must be held accountable for his crimes. That being said, the far greater criminals are those in the Bush and Obama administrations who sent them to kill and die in wars based on lies.

Bringing those criminals to justice is the task of the

working class as part of the struggle against imperialist war and the capitalist profit system which is its source.

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