

# US Army hearing begins into March 2012 Afghan atrocity

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An Army pre-trial hearing opened Monday at Tacoma, Washington-area Joint Base Lewis-McChord into the March 11 massacre that left 16 Afghan civilians dead and six others wounded.

Staff Sergeant Robert Bales is charged with 16 counts of premeditated murder and six counts of attempted murder. The atrocity is the worst case of an individual soldier killing civilians since the Vietnam War. Afghan protests in its aftermath forced the US to halt combat operations for several days.

If the presiding officer in the hearing recommends a court martial, Bales could face the death penalty. The 39-year-old soldier is accused of attacking two small farming villages in the Panjwai district of the southern province of Kandahar, Afghanistan, near Camp Belambay.

Bales allegedly burst into homes while families were asleep and shot them execution-style, using a 9mm pistol and an M4 rifle with a grenade launcher. Nine of the victims were infants and children, and 11 of the victims were from the same family. After being shot, their bodies were pulled into a pile and set ablaze.

Bales has not entered a plea and is not expected to testify in the pre-trial hearing.

An Army DNA expert testified Thursday that a small sample test revealed Bales' clothing was soaked with the blood of at least nine people when he surrendered upon returning to Camp Belambay that night. "I tried to take what I thought was a representative item," DNA examiner Christine Trapolsi explained. Only one of the samples could be matched to the scene of the killings, in all likelihood owing to the Army's three-week delay in evidence-gathering after the massacre.

On Wednesday, testimony focused on the casualties. Major Travis Hawks, a medic, described the horror of wounded women and children he received at Forward

Operating Base Zangabad on March 11.

Tuesday's hearing centered on testimony from fellow soldiers at Belambay. According to one, Bales refused to answer questions about where he had been after returning to base. "If I answer, you guys will have to testify against me," Sergeant 1st Class James Stillwell recalled him saying. When the medic asked where the blood on his clothing had come from, Bales shrugged. Prosecutors said the response suggested that Bales had mental control and knew what he was doing during the attacks.

"They're probably not going to let me see my wife and kids," Bales told Sergeant 1st Class Derek King of the 7th Special Forces group, one of the guards who detained him. "I thought I was doing the right thing," he allegedly said, adding, "It's bad, it's really bad."

King testified that Bales had told him, "I guess four was too much," referring to the four different homes he had rampaged through. The soldier had gone out without body armor, wearing a T-shirt, night-vision goggles, and a bed sheet tied around his neck like a cape.

Several Afghan villagers as well as US soldiers insisted Bales did not act alone, as the Army prosecution charges. On Tuesday, a junior soldier testified that he and three others at the Belambay outpost speculated that a second sergeant had gone with Bales to the first village.

A November 8 CBS News interview with Afghan villagers found that some survivors recalled more than one gunman. Nabaryan, whose brother and six-month-old nephew were among the dead, said his sister-in-law reported more than one soldier in the home. "She told me they had lights on their heads," he said. "They were searching the house, and they told her to be quiet or they'd kill her too."

A 15-year-old boy who was wounded in the attack told CBS he had seen only one gunman. “I see everything clearly, over and over,” he said. “He pushed me against the wall, and put the pistol to my sister’s head. We all started shouting: ‘Don’t kill her.’” The boy ran into another room when the shooting started. “My uncle, my little cousin and my grandmother were killed. I was told to put my hands on the wall, and then he shot my sister in the head.”

Bales’ defense team has sought to emphasize the soldier’s psychological and personal problems, suggesting that he had suffered from a concussive brain injury and post-traumatic stress. He entered the military in 2001 after the September 11 attacks, which marked the end of his short run as a financial investor. At the time of the massacre, Bales was on his fourth combat deployment to the Middle East with the Lewis-McChord 3rd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division. He had recently been passed over for a promotion. At home, his family was facing financial strain, including an underwater mortgage and mounting debt. Like many soldiers, Bales abused alcohol and took steroids.

In the aftermath of the atrocity, survivors and relatives of the victims demanded that Bales be tried in Afghanistan rather than the US. Military personnel stationed in the country enjoy immunity from Afghan law, an arrangement that reflects the colonial relationship between the puppet regime of President Hamid Karzai and Washington.

Like the defense, the Army has sought to portray the massacre as the act of one “rogue” soldier. In March, President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and the US commander in Afghanistan, General John Allen, all issued statements declaring that the war crime did not express the values and attitudes of the US. In fact, such atrocities are an inevitable feature of imperialist war.

Whatever is revealed in the pre-trial hearing about the events of March 11, it is clear from the anger and distrust among survivors that Afghans view the massacre not as an aberration, but of a piece with US military actions in the region. Bales may have acted alone and without authorization, but US forces have continuously conducted “night raids” on civilians in the name of combating resistance fighters. The Pentagon claims to have killed at least 4,000 “insurgents” in such raids. The Obama administration’s radical expansion of

drone missile attacks has claimed thousands more innocents.

The March 11 atrocity is one of a steady stream of barbaric acts committed by US troops, including the actions of the so-called “kill team” also tried at Lewis-McChord for killing unarmed Afghan civilians. In January, a video showing Marines urinating on Afghan corpses and laughing, followed in February by the burning of copies of the Koran, sparked rioting across the country that left 30 people dead.

The task of suppressing a hostile population has contributed to deep demoralization and depravity in a wide section of the US military. An annual summary of Army personnel in August found that only a quarter believed the military was “headed in the right direction” in its policies. The findings dovetail with a record number of soldier suicides and another internal survey of soldiers stationed in Afghanistan that found one in five reporting an acute psychological problem such as “acute stress,” “depression,” or “anxiety.”

More than 11 years of occupation have failed to quell the opposition. One expression of the popular hostility is the rising incidence of “green on blue” violence, in which Afghan security forces attack American and NATO soldiers. Since the beginning of the year, at least 52 coalition forces have been killed by Afghan soldiers or police, and an unreported number of Afghan forces have themselves been killed in similar attacks.



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