Survivors describe bloodbath in Afghan atrocity

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Over three nights last week, Afghan witnesses testified via live video-link in the pre-trial hearing against US Army Staff Sergeant Robert Bales (See "Army pre-trial hearing into March 2012 Afghan massacre concludes"). Bales is accused of carrying out a rampage through two farming villages in southern Kandahar province near Camp Belambay on March 11, 2012.

The atrocity left 16 unarmed civilians dead and 6 others wounded. Most of the victims were children.

Seven-year-old Robina explained that she hid behind her father when the gunman entered their home in the village of Alkozai. "I saw one guy who came inside the home," she testified. "I was standing behind my father. He shot my father." She was hit in the leg, but was in a state of shock as she witnessed her father collapse and die, cursing in agony and outrage. "I didn't realize I was shot until later," she said.

Zardana, an 8-year-old girl who appeared with Robina, had been among the worst wounded survivors of the attack. She had been shot in the head and barely survived. After months in a Navy hospital in the US, she has regained the ability to walk and talk. The children testified that they saw lights around the home, suggesting that multiple soldiers were outside.

Zardana's brother, Quadratullah, also testified. Through an interpreter, he said that he and others had run for cover screaming, "We are children! We are children!

"Then he shot, he shot one of the children," he said.

Sadiquallah, a boy of 13, recounted being awakened by a neighbor woman who was crying that an American had "killed our men."

Haji Mohammed Naim said he was awakened before the shootings by the sound of barking dogs and gunfire. Naim said he assumed that a night raid was underway. When a single gunman jumped a wall and entered his home, Naim confronted him, asking, "What are you doing?" Naim was shot multiple times at close range across his neck and chest.

Sadiquallah and another child, Rafiullah, ran into a storage room and hid behind a curtain. Sadiquallah suffered a fractured skull from a bullet wound to the head. The gunman, he testified, had a blindingly bright flashlight, making it impossible to identify him.

Rafiullah was shot in the thigh. He said from his hiding place, he saw the soldier come after his sister. The man "came, he put a pistol in my sister's mouth and then my grandmother started wrestling with him." The grandmother was shot dead.

Rafiullah's father, Samiullah, was not at home at the time of the attack. He returned to find that his two wounded children had been taken to a military base for medical care.

The corpses of his aged mother and three other relatives were still lying on the floor of his home. "I just saw her," he said. "I cried, and I could not look on her face."

Other witnesses who testified expressed disbelief that such a massive slaughter could have been perpetrated by a single soldier. While offering no evidence to the contrary, Afghan policeman Major Khudai Dad said, "There's no way it was one person."

Mullah Baraan's brother, Mohammed Dawood, was killed. Baraan spoke on behalf of his widowed sister-in-law. "I talked to my brother's wife and I had her tell me exactly what happened." She had said a single man had entered the home in the village of Najiban.

Previously, in an informal interview, the widow had said she overheard multiple Americans speaking English in the surrounding homes and saw multiple flares shoot into the sky.

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Surveillance video from 4:30 a.m. on March 11 captured only a single person walking from Najiban to Camp Belambay.

Witnesses described unspeakable carnage in Najiban. “This is my request: to give justice,” said Mullah Khamal Adin, who lost 11 relatives.

Adin had to collect the corpses of his family members in the home of his cousin, Wazir. He found the body of his uncle’s wife, Shatara, in the home’s entrance. “When I grabbed her, half of her head fell down and her eyes fell on the ground,” he said.

Inside the home, Adin found a pile of naked, burned bodies. Seven of the victims were children; four were under 5 years old. He said several of the youngest children bore the imprints of boot marks on their faces.

He speculated that 2-year-old Palwasha had been tossed onto the fire while she was still alive.

The others, Adin said, “were all shot in their heads. Their brains were still on their pillows.”

Adin said his cousin, Wazir, was away on the night of the attack. Wazir gave away all of the family’s belongings. He “left everything behind and he has never come to the compound again.” He lost six children in the massacre.

“I saw the person who killed my brother sitting there, head down with guilt,” Haji Mullah Baraan told the Associated Press on Monday after testifying. “He didn’t look up toward the camera.”

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