

US Sgt. Robert Bales pleads guilty in Kandahar massacre

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On Wednesday, Staff Sergeant Robert Bales, 39, pled guilty to 33 of 34 charges in what has become known as the Kandahar massacre, which left 16 Afghan civilians dead and another six injured.

The guilty plea, worked out between Bales' defense and the Army prosecution, guarantees that the death penalty will not be pursued in the case. A sentencing date is set for mid-August, when the judge, Colonel Jeffery Nance, will decide whether Bales will be allowed the possibility of parole with the life sentence he is expected to receive.

The attack, in which many innocent victims, including women and children, were murdered in cold blood, has become a symbol of the criminality of the US-led occupation of Afghanistan, now entering its 12th year. In the early morning hours of March 11, 2012, Staff Sergeant Bales massacred 16 Afghan civilians, including nine children, in two poor farming villages in the Panjwai district of Kandahar Province. Six others were injured in the murderous rampage.

According to Bales' testimony on Wednesday, prior to the attacks he had been drinking contraband alcohol with fellow soldiers, snorting Valium (an anti-anxiety prescription drug), and taking steroids at his post in Camp Belambay, a military base near the two villages he attacked. The two separate attacks, occurring only about an hour apart, were carried out in the nearby villages of Alkozai and Najiban, both less than two miles from the base.

In between the attacks, Bales briefly returned to Camp Belambay, only to then leave once again after a fellow soldier dismissed Bales' claims of the attack on Alkozai. Following his attack on Najiban, Bales surrendered without incident upon returning to the base, which had already been alerted by the Afghan security forces that a soldier was spotted leaving Camp

Belambay a couple of hours after midnight.

Bales' testimony on Wednesday was the first time that he gave a public account of the events of that morning. At one point, when the judge asked if Bales had deliberately burnt some of his victims by setting them on fire with kerosene, which he did not remember but was documented, Bales responded, "It's the only thing that makes sense, sir."

During Bales' Article 32 pretrial hearing in November 2012, victims and witnesses testified via video teleconference about what they saw and experienced. Mullah Khamal Adin, who lost 11 relatives in the carnage but was not present during the attack, spoke about walking into the home of his cousin, where he not only found his uncle's wife dead with shots to her head, but also a pile of naked and burned corpses, seven of which were children. "This is my request: to give justice," Adin said through the video teleconference.

Survivors or relatives of victims of Bales' assault spoke to the Associated Press last month. Mohammed Wazir, Adin's cousin, was away with his three-year-old son at the time of the attack on his home. The 11 family members murdered in that home were Wazir's wife, his mother, two brothers, a 13-year-old nephew and his six children. Wazir, who is now left only with his son, Habib Shah, said that "[h]e misses his mother all the time."

Zardana, an 11-year-old victim who survived a shot to the head with a serious disability, witnessed her grandmother murdered and her 16-year-old brother, Rafiullah, shot in both legs during Bales' rampage on their home. Describing Bales' indiscriminate shooting, Rafiullah stated in the AP interview that he "just went bang, bang, bang."

When asked by the judge during Wednesday's

proceedings why he carried out these heinous attacks on civilians, many of them women and children, Bales responded: “Sir, as far as why—I have asked myself the question a million times. And there is not a good reason in the world for why I did the horrible things I did.”

Bales’ unambiguous declaration of personal responsibility, designed to avoid the death penalty, sheds a harsh light on the entire occupation of Afghanistan. While Bales is indeed responsible for his crime, it emerges directly out of the imperialist character of the war in Afghanistan.

In so-called “night raids” mounted by US and allied Special Forces, troops appear in households suspected of sheltering insurgents during the middle of the night, attacking people they believe to be targets appearing on a “kill/capture list.” Such raids, in which many Afghans have died, have become a focal point of opposition in the Afghan population. (See “US/NATO death squads killing indiscriminately in Afghanistan”).

They are so unpopular that even Afghan President Hamid Karzai, the head of the US puppet regime in Kabul, has felt obliged to repeatedly call for them to be ended.

Under conditions where soldiers are constantly exposed to such tactics and to the stress of combat, it is inevitable that certain individuals will snap and, as Bales did, take the methods of death squad killings into their own hands.

This appears to have been what occurred in Bales’ case. Serving his fourth combat tour at the time—he had served three tours previously in Iraq, being wounded twice—he had shown signs of post-traumatic stress disorder and had experienced a severe brain injury. Just days before the attacks, he had witnessed a fellow soldier lose a leg from a roadside bomb.



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