

Civilians were killed in New Zealand-US raid on Afghan village

Tom Peters
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An investigation by journalist Jon Stephenson, broadcast on Maori Television on Monday, found that a raid on an Afghan village on August 22, 2010, involving New Zealand, US and Afghan soldiers, resulted in 21 casualties, all of them innocent civilians.

According to the report—based on interviews with survivors, NGOs and Afghan government officials, and cell phone videos of the dead—six people were killed, including a three-year-old girl, and 15 were wounded.

The night-time raid on the village of Tirgiran in Baghlan province was in retaliation for an insurgent attack on New Zealand soldiers in neighbouring Bamiyan province on August 4 that killed Lieutenant Tim O'Donnell.

The US-led attack, which unleashed awesome firepower against an apparently defenceless village, was typical of the operations of the occupation forces. The war, which has lasted more than 12 years and caused tens of thousands of deaths, is a neo-colonial venture that faces widespread and entrenched opposition. The aim of such attacks is to terrorise the population into submission.

US helicopter gunships repeatedly fired on houses and dropped off NZ SAS troops, who burst into people's homes. According to a press statement at the time by the US-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), 12 "insurgents" were killed. But ISAF also said there was a "possibility" of civilian deaths because a helicopter gun "malfunction" led to soldiers shooting into the wrong building. The *New York Times* quoted district governor Mohammed Ismail two days after the raid, who said eight people had been killed, including two women and a child.

In April 2011, NZ's then defence minister Wayne Mapp told TVNZ that the raid was necessary "to protect our people." He said allegations of civilian

deaths had "been investigated and proven to be false."

However, Said Ahmad, a 38-year-old farmer, who received shrapnel wounds from the raid, told Stephenson: "There were no Taliban. All of the people that were killed or wounded were innocent people ... The helicopters were going, coming, going and coming in circles and firing on people. They shot at us and killed and wounded defenseless people."

Mohammad Iqbal, another farmer who still has shrapnel lodged in his back and is unable to work, claimed that nine of those wounded were women.

Dr Abdul Rahman, one of the first people who arrived after the attack, showed Stephenson pictures of the dead and the wounded, and explained that he helped to bury a three-year-old girl named Fatima. Rahman provided a certificate issued by the former district governor, listing the names of the dead and wounded.

Stephenson noted that the United Nations and the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission both acknowledged the civilian casualties in a 2011 report. He also stated: "SAS troopers who took part in the mission are concerned that civilians died there." He said there were no claims that NZ troops had themselves killed civilians.

Despite the extensive evidence that the raid on Tirgiran resulted in a massacre of innocent people, the NZ government dismissed Stephenson's report. Prime Minister John Key told TV3 last Tuesday that a "thorough review" by the Chief of Defence Force had found that "there were insurgents that were killed but that was it."

Defence Minister Jonathan Coleman was more evasive. He told reporters: "New Zealanders were not involved—and that's categorical—in any civilian casualties or deaths." Then he added that he "couldn't rule out" that civilians had died in the raid "through

actions taken by other forces.”

Stephenson hit back at the government, telling TV3 that, in addition to the eyewitness accounts in his report, “I did a lot of other investigation and confirmed from very senior Afghan officials, and from people like hospital directors and NGOs, that those accounts were accurate. So I think the prime minister’s in another world if he thinks that all this evidence counts for nothing and that he is categorically right.”

Stephenson has been harassed and spied on by the government and the military for previous reports exposing the complicity of NZ forces in war crimes—including a May 2011 report that revealed NZ troops had handed over prisoners to US and Afghan authorities for torture.

Last year the *Sunday Star-Times* revealed that the NZ military collaborated with US spy agencies to monitor Stephenson’s phone calls, and those of his associates, when he was in Afghanistan. A Defence Force manual leaked to the newspaper said “certain investigative journalists” should be regarded as a subversive “threat.” It said they could “obtain politically sensitive information” that could “bring the Government into disrepute” and called for “counter-intelligence” operations against them.

In June 2011, Stephenson complained to police after allegedly receiving a death threat from a senior SAS officer at a Wellington bar. Police said they investigated but did not lay charges.

Following Stephenson’s latest report, the political establishment closed ranks to defend the military. Labour leader David Cunliffe made a vague call for an “investigation” into the raid, while declaring that “New Zealand’s military has a proud record ... It’s likely that New Zealand troops are not culpable but I think all New Zealanders would want to see the air cleared and the New Zealand military’s honour upheld.”

It was the 1999-2008 Labour government, supported by the “left wing” Alliance Party, that first sent SAS commandos into Afghanistan in 2001. More than a hundred NZ soldiers remained in the country until April 2013. Ten of them died.

Journalist Nicky Hager’s 2011 book *Other People’s Wars* revealed that intelligence agents from NZ’s Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB) also worked throughout the war under US commanders, helping to select targets for assassination by ground

troops or air strikes across Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Greens, who supported the main troop deployment to Afghanistan, have remained silent on Stephenson’s revelations. So has the Maori nationalist Mana Party and its electoral ally, the Internet Party.

The coverup is driven by a definite agenda. Successive governments have strengthened military and intelligence ties with Washington, on which NZ’s ruling elite relies to conduct its own neo-colonial interests in the South Pacific.

Labour and the Greens, along with the National Party government, have not only indicated that they would support direct US intervention in Syria and Iraq. The political establishment backs the US military build-up in the Asia-Pacific, aimed at preparing for war against China. Key’s visit to Washington last month signalled closer collaboration with the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia.”

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