

Royal Marines stage protest in London to defend war criminal

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On Wednesday, an unprecedented demonstration of former and serving Royal Marines was held in London.

The demonstration took place in Parliament Square outside the Houses of Commons, before marching on the prime minister's residence in Downing Street.

The Royal Marines are the elite armed forces of the British Army, equivalent to the US Navy SEALs.

Depending on the political persuasion of the media outlets and newspapers reporting the event, the numbers attending ranged from hundreds (BBC) to thousands (*Daily Mail*).

The protest was held in support of Sergeant Alexander Blackman who was found guilty of the murder of an injured Afghan prisoner of war by a military court in November 2013. Blackman's supporters are calling for a review of his case, with a view to reducing or quashing his conviction.

The murder took place on September 15, 2011 in a cornfield in Helmand province, Afghanistan. Blackman and his patrol found the man seriously injured by gunfire from an Apache helicopter. Blackman shot him in the chest at close range with a 9mm pistol.

The murder was filmed from another marine's helmet-mounted camera. Although stills have been released, the judge at the court martial requested the full video not be made public.

After he shot the prisoner, Blackman was captured on camera stating, "There you are. Shuffle off this mortal coil you c***. It's nothing you wouldn't do to us."

He turned to those watching and stated, "Obviously this doesn't go anywhere, fellas. I just broke the Geneva Convention."

In December 2013, Blackman was handed a life sentence, with a minimum of 10 years to be served in a civilian prison. He appealed the life sentence and in May 2014 lost at the Court of Appeal. However, the minimum term was cut from 10 years to eight.

It is not known exactly how many serving personnel took part in the demonstration, but they did so in defiance of official instructions. A Ministry of Defence spokeswoman confirmed, "Serving members of the military are given routine reminders that, according to the Queens Regulations RN, they are not to attend any political protests, marches, rallies or demonstrations."

Queens Regulations forbidding members of the armed forces from attending political protests have been in place since at least 1844. These state that "under no circumstances whatever will they do so [attend protests] in uniform."

The MoD added, "Any gathering which seeks to protest against a decision taken by the legal system or the government falls into this category."

Protesters attended the march with banners and placards, with some bringing official Royal Marine flags. Most wore the official Royal Marines green beret. One participant held a placard declaring, "If killing the enemy is 'murder', then you should arrest me too!"

Around 500 of the protesters marched to Downing Street where Blackman's wife handed in a letter to Prime Minister David Cameron. The letter describes Blackman's sentence as a "gross miscarriage of justice" and calls for it to go to the Criminal Case Review Commission.

The letter states that Blackman "believed this man to be dead when he discharged his weapon. This may be a breach of the Geneva Convention for desecrating a corpse but it is not murder."

This is patently false. At the trial, a pathologist described the physical movements of the prisoner before he was killed and said in his expert opinion he was still clearly alive.

The Geneva Conventions govern the treatment of captured and wounded prisoners of war, and are international treaties binding on all states accepting their

provisions. The Geneva Conventions Act 1957 is an Act of Parliament of the United Kingdom.

Article three of the third convention requires that those who have laid down their arms or who cannot fight due to sickness, wounds or detention should be “treated humanely, without any adverse distinction founded on race, colour, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria.”

It is prohibited to pass sentences on prisoners or carry out executions without a constituted court judgement. Finally, it is forbidden to harm, degrade, humiliate or take hostage a prisoner.

The London protest in support of Blackman is the product of a concerted campaign by the most right-wing sections of the media, including the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*, as well as prominent Conservative and Labour politicians who argue that Blackman has been “abandoned” by the top brass in the armed forces and should have received a lesser sentence. One of Blackman’s most prominent supporters is Nigel Farage, the leader of the right-wing UK Independence Party.

Last month the *Daily Mail* launched a “campaign for justice” for Blackman. Within a month, a fund drive had raised over £800,000, which the newspaper noted means Blackman “can now mount a new legal campaign to have his case reviewed.”

The newspaper ran a front-page headline “Defiance of the Marines” above a photo of the demonstration, describing it as a “show of force.”

The protest was a “very angry family reunion” consisting mainly of “former Marines plus ex-servicemen from all the Forces... lurking among them—purse-lipped, heads down and disobeying orders—were even one or two current members of the Corps.”

The protest was timed to coincide with the anniversary of the founding of the Royal Marines on October 28, 1664. The *Mail* noted, “If there was one discordant note at this event, it was that most of the Royal Marines’ former officer cadre were not here. They had elected, instead, to attend a birthday dinner for the Corps in the City of London.”

Those among Blackman’s supporters point out that many of those responsible for commissioning far greater crimes—the politicians and senior military figures that planned and organised the interventions into Afghanistan and Iraq, based on a pack of lies—have escaped any punishment.

The protest took place in the week that former Prime Minister Tony Blair used an interview with CNN as a pre-

emptive response to the government inquiry, led by Sir John Chilcot, into the Iraq war.

Blair has never been held to account for this war crime, nor his role in commissioning the invasion of Afghanistan. Both wars were conducted in defiance of international law and there is no question that these monumental crimes gave rise to many others. But the London protest was not intended as a counter to this. Rather it is a deliberate attempt to glorify the army and to justify British imperialism’s role in further criminal ventures, such as that underway in Syria.

More fundamental still, it is part of a deliberate attempt by sections of the ruling elite to condition public opinion to accept the open intrusion of the military into political life within the UK itself. It comes just a month after a senior serving unnamed British general threatened “direct action” by the armed forces against a future Labour government led by its “left” leader Jeremy Corbyn.

The general, speaking to the *Sunday Times*, owned by billionaire oligarch Rupert Murdoch, said that if Corbyn came to power, “There would be mass resignations at all levels and you would face the very real prospect of an event which would effectively be a mutiny ...”

Despite this open threat of a coup, no effort has been made to uncover the identity of the officer involved and to sack and prosecute him. Corbyn and the Labour Party have made no demand for further action.

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