

The blood on Obama's hands: Kunduz hospital attack designed "to kill and destroy"

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"Patients burned in their beds, medical staff were decapitated and lost limbs, and others were shot by the circling AC-130 gunship while fleeing the burning building."

So reads the opening of an initial review issued Thursday by Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders—MSF), documenting the horrifying October 3 US airstrike on the charitable agency's hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan.

While spelling out the carnage inflicted upon wounded men, women and children as well as doctors, nurses and other medical staff that day, the report adds to the already overwhelming evidence that the attack was neither an accident nor a case of "collateral damage," but rather a deliberate war crime ordered by the Pentagon to further US military objectives in Afghanistan.

Among the new information provided by the report is that, after repeatedly providing the Pentagon, the US Army in Kabul as well as the Afghan authorities with the coordinates of the well-known medical facility, MSF staff at the Kunduz hospital received a phone call two nights before the attack from a US government official in Washington. He asked whether it "had a large number of Taliban 'holed up' there." The official was told that the hospital was functioning normally and at full capacity, with some wounded Taliban fighters among the patients.

The hospital, the report states, was well-lit and clearly marked, with MSF insignia on its roof. Based on interviews with some 60 staff members, the report establishes that there were no armed individuals in the facility and, indeed, there had been no fighting, gunshots or explosions in the vicinity of the hospital in the evening preceding the attack.

The attack by the slow-moving, propeller-driven

AC-130 gunship lasted between an hour and an hour and 15 minutes, with the plane continuously circling the hospital, hitting it with its multiple rapid-fire cannon, precision bombs and missiles.

"The view from inside the hospital is that this attack was conducted with a purpose to kill and destroy," Christopher Stokes, MSF's general director, told reporters at a press conference in Kabul on Thursday. "A mistake is quite hard to understand and believe at this time."

The MSF report gives a chilling sense of the brutality of this crime. It recounts that the first area to be hit was the Intensive Care Unit, where immobile patients, including two children, were killed outright or burned to death in their hospital beds.

The operating theaters were then destroyed, with at least two patients killed as they lay on operating tables.

"An MSF nurse arrived at the administrative building covered from head to toe in debris and blood with his left arm hanging from a small piece of tissue after having suffered a traumatic amputation in the blast," the report recounts.

Staff members described people being mowed down as they tried to flee the airstrike. "MSF doctors and other medical staff were shot while running to reach safety in a different part of the compound," the report adds.

"One MSF staff member described a patient in a wheelchair attempting to escape from the inpatient department when he was killed by shrapnel from a blast," the report states. "Other MSF staff describe seeing people running while on fire and then falling unconscious on the ground. One MSF staff was decapitated by shrapnel in the airstrikes."

The US airstrike turned what had been the principal medical facility for over one million people in

northeastern Afghanistan into hell on earth. In addition to wantonly killing patients and medical staff, it left the region's entire population without badly needed medical care.

There are two plausible theories that have been advanced to explain the attack. The first, based on reporting by AP, indicates that the strike was ordered out of suspicion that a Pakistani intelligence officer who was coordinating operations with the Taliban was present in the hospital. In other words, mass murder against innocent civilians was carried out as part of a "targeted assassination" against one man.

The other explanation is that the US military decided to obliterate the hospital because it was treating wounded Taliban fighters.

In either case, under international law the attack constitutes a war crime, the kind of offense for which Nazi officers were tried and convicted at Nuremberg.

But not so under the legal rationales for US criminal aggression fashioned under the Obama administration.

As the four-part series, "The Pentagon's Law of War Manual," being finalized on the *World Socialist Web Site* today establishes, the pseudo-legal doctrine that has been crafted for the US military, while giving a formal nod to international law's prohibition against targeting civilians, makes clear that in practice such attacks are not only allowed but encouraged.

"Civilians may be killed incidentally in military operations; however, the expected incidental harm to civilians may not be excessive in relation to the anticipated military advantage from an attack," the law of war manual states. In other words, the US military is allowed to kill civilians, and the greater the military objective, the more innocent men, women and children, not to mention doctors, nurses and patients, may be slaughtered.

Similarly, while stating that "feasible precautions" should be taken to "avoid" civilian casualties, the manual goes on to affirm that, if US commanders determine that "taking a precaution would result in operational risk (i.e., a risk of failing to accomplish the mission) or an increased risk of harm to their own forces, then the precaution would not be feasible and would not be required." This is a clear mandate to US military officers to wipe out however many civilians they deem necessary to "accomplish the mission" or reduce their own casualties.

No doubt, within the US chain of command, such calculations were made to arrive at the decision to order an AC-130 to slowly and deliberately reduce a civilian hospital to rubble, killing at least 30 patients and medical staff and wounding many others.

The responsibility for this crime lies not merely with the crew of the flying gunship, the commanders on the ground in Afghanistan or the top brass of the US military. It extends to the top of the US political establishment, including President Barack Obama and his top aides, who have done so much to make murderous violence around the world routine, from aggressive war, to drone assassinations to cold-blooded massacres.

The White House and the Pentagon have thus far stonewalled MSF's demand for an independent investigation into the Kunduz hospital massacre.

Even more telling, Joanne Liu, president of MSF, reported this week that the agency had appealed to some 76 governments seeking support for an impartial investigation, but had received none. "The silence is embarrassing," Liu told Reuters.

Behind this apparent indifference by capitalist governments around the globe to the horrors unleashed by the US military in Kunduz lies the recognition that this attack constituted not the exception, but the rule, not the product of a "tragic error" or "collateral damage," but the inevitable expression of the criminality of American imperialism.



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