

US military whitewashes attack on Afghan hospital

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The Pentagon's final report into last October's deadly US airstrike on a Doctors Without Borders (MSF) hospital in northern Afghanistan is a brazen whitewash. The protracted attack by an AC-130 gunship on the medical facility in Kunduz killed 42 civilians, some of whom were burned alive in their beds, and others mowed down as they attempted to flee.

General Joseph Votel, commander of US Central Command, told a press conference yesterday that the attack on the MSF hospital was not a war crime because it had not been intentional. He claimed that neither the gunship crew members nor the Special Forces on the ground directing the attack "knew they were striking a medical facility."

The report blamed the deaths on "human errors compounded by process and equipment failures." None of those involved will face a court martial or criminal charges. Instead, 16 American military personnel have been punished with "administrative actions" that range from suspension and removal from command to letters of reprimand. None have been named, and some are still active in overseas war zones.

The Pentagon's account of events on the night of October 3 is riddled with contradictions. The AC-130 supposedly took off early without the crew being briefed and without a database being uploaded to the aircraft's computers that would have identified the Kunduz hospital as a protected building. MSF had previously provided coordinates to the US military, and the hospital was marked with the organisation's insignia.

The report claimed that the hospital had been mistaken for the intended target—the National Directorate of Security building that had been taken over by Taliban forces—some 400 metres away. The aircraft's data link failed and it came under fire, forcing

it to move to a safe distance. The coordinates provided by Afghan ground forces supposedly directed the aircraft's weapons at an empty field, forcing the crew to rely on visual identification.

At 2:08 am, the AC-130 gunship, which is armed with 40mm and 20mm cannons as well as a 105mm howitzer, began its devastating attack. Within minutes, MSF personnel contacted the American military saying they were under fire, but the onslaught continued.

According to the Pentagon report, the Special Forces commander on the ground finally called off the attack at 2:38 am—half an hour later. A MSF inquiry based on eyewitness statements found the assault continued for between 60 and 75 minutes, clearly contradicting the Pentagon's claims.

Moreover, the Pentagon report itself concluded that the hospital was not being used by the Taliban as a base of operations—negating Afghan government allegations to the contrary. No one was firing or carrying out hostile acts from the hospital. Yet the Special Forces commander on the ground ordered the attack anyway in violation of rules of engagement that authorise airstrikes only to protect US or allied forces.

At his press conference, General Votel justified the attack by declaring that the American aircraft was operating in "an extraordinarily intense combat situation" in which it was trying to support Afghan troops. At the same time, he claimed that it was often not possible for trained operators to tell if fire was coming from a particular building or location.

The Pentagon's account is simply not credible. If the aircraft was plagued by equipment failure and the crew had difficulty identifying the target, why was the mission not simply aborted?

Doctors Without Borders has reiterated its call for an independent inquiry. MSF President Meinie Nicolai

told the media: “Today’s briefing amounts to an admission of an uncontrolled military operation in a densely populated urban area, during when US forces failed to follow the basic laws of war...

“There are questions here, on the self defence called in by the troops, even though it was a quiet evening. Why didn’t they call off the operation if they had such a malfunctioning system, they had a duty to take precautions, and they had doubts about the target?” Nicolai said.

John Sifton, Asia policy director of Human Rights Watch, told the *New York Times* that the failure to bring criminal charges was “inexplicable”. He said that the Pentagon’s assertion that no war crime had been committed because the attack was unintentional was “flatly wrong”, pointing out that recklessness or negligence did not absolve someone of criminal responsibility.

In reality, the Pentagon’s elaborate account of human errors and equipment malfunctions stinks of a carefully contrived cover-up. A far more straightforward explanation is that the US military deliberately targeted the hospital either to assassinate a particular “high-value” individual, or to destroy a facility that treated everyone, including wounded Taliban fighters.

The chief responsibility for what is clearly a war crime rests not just with the immediate operational commanders but with the Pentagon top brass and the Obama administration. Hundreds of civilians have been slaughtered as a result of indiscriminate drone attacks in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen and other countries.

Moreover, in nearly a decade-and-a-half of war in Afghanistan, the Pentagon has routinely denied responsibility for civilian deaths. It has acknowledged such crimes only when, as in the case of the Kunduz hospital, the evidence is overwhelming. In the wake of the Kunduz slaughter, the US military provided a so-called condolence payment of \$6,000 to the families of the dead and \$3,000 to injured victims.

The Pentagon’s whitewash of the airstrike on the Kunduz hospital is in marked contrast to the immediate US condemnation of an alleged Syrian government attack on a MSF hospital in the city of Aleppo on Wednesday. At least 27 patients and staff were killed in the attack.

US Secretary of State John Kerry said that the US was “outraged” by the attack. Without waiting for facts

and details, he declared that “it appears to have been a deliberate strike on a known facility and follows the Assad regime’s appalling record of striking such facilities.”

Kerry’s denunciation of the Aleppo attack simply underscores the crimes of the Obama administration for which no one has been held accountable.



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