Book details killing of Afghan civilians in New Zealand SAS raid

Tom Peters
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On the night of August 21–22, 2010, New Zealand Special Air Service (NZSAS) commandos led an assault on two villages in the Tirgiran Valley in Baghlan province, Afghanistan. They were accompanied by Afghan special forces and two US Apache helicopter gunships. Six people were killed, including a three-year-old girl, fifteen others wounded and 12 houses destroyed.

A detailed picture of the attack on the villages of Naik and Khak Khuday Dad was published on March 21 in the book *Hit and Run: The New Zealand SAS in Afghanistan and the Meaning of Honour* by journalists Jon Stephenson and Nicky Hager. The authors conclude that there are "reasonable grounds to suspect" that NZ and US forces were involved in "war crimes."

Tens of thousands of people have perished in similar operations since the illegal US invasion of the impoverished country. By default, the US and its allies report any casualties as "insurgents," if they mention them at all.

NZSAS operations in Afghanistan, which began in 2001, have been cloaked in secrecy. The unit consists of elite killers whose services are prized by Washington. In 2004, members of the NZSAS received a personal award from President George W. Bush.

The revelations in *Hit and Run* have sparked a storm of controversy in New Zealand. The book exposes a cover-up by the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) and the National Party government, which have repeatedly denied that there were any civilian casualties in the August 2010 raid.

Hager and Stephenson obtained secret military documents and other information from dozens of sources, including members of the SAS and Afghan security forces involved in the attack and villagers who survived it.

The deaths were first reported in the Afghan media the day after the raid. Hundreds of people protested in Tala wa Barfuk, demanding that the soldiers responsible be punished.

Hit and Run quotes a NZSAS source saying the soldiers "knew they had committed an atrocity." The authors also note: "A secret Operation Burnham post-activity report listed casualties, including an older man, small child and female who had died." Operation Burnham was the codename for the raid.

The SAS, however, helped draft a press release issued by the US-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) which claimed that the raid killed 12 insurgents and "no civilians were injured or killed."

In April 2011, the New Zealand media reported that the raid was in retaliation for the death of Lieutenant Tim O'Donnell, a New Zealand soldier killed by insurgents in an attack on August 3, 2010. Then Defence Minister Wayne Mapp told TVNZ that allegations of civilian deaths had "been investigated and proven to be false."

In 2014, Stephenson recorded interviews for Maori Television with survivors of the attack who revealed the civilian deaths and injuries. The Defence Force and then Prime Minister John Key again dismissed the evidence of civilian deaths. Key told TV3 "there were insurgents that were killed, but that was it."

Hit and Run demolishes these claims. It includes photographs of injured civilians, grave sites, destroyed houses, and the official list of dead and wounded compiled by Afghanistan's Independent Directorate of Local Governance. It also names the alleged insurgents targeted for arrest or killing by the NZSAS. None were in the villages during the raid.

Most of the casualties were from the US helicopters, which "rained down cannon fire and rockets, destroying the houses" and killing people who tried to escape. Three-year-old Fatima "died in her mother's arms when a piece of shrapnel hit her in the head," a local said. Abdul Faqir, a 27-year-old farmer, was found the next day with a piece of rocket lodged in his body; he had slowly died over nine

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hours.

The bodies of 55-year-old Mohammad Iqbal and his son Abdul were found outside Naik, lacerated by bullets. Two other men, including a young teacher, were shot dead, probably by SAS snipers, as they tried to flee Khak Khuday Dad.

Operation Burnham was personally approved by then Chief of Defence Force Jerry Mateparae, Defence Minister Mapp and Prime Minister Key.

Hager and Stephenson quote Mapp describing the raid as "our biggest and most disastrous operation. A fiasco." Following the publication of *Hit and Run*, Mapp (who retired at the end of 2011) admitted making this statement. He claimed that he only learned of the civilian casualties from the 2014 documentary and he then spoke to Stephenson for the book.

Mapp still defended the NZSAS assault. He told Radio NZ on March 23 that NZ Army forces in Bamiyan province "had been under constant attack" from the direction of the Tirgiran Valley, "*so this was in essence a hostile village.* Bomb-makers and the like lived there… *insurgents, civilians [are] often in fact the same people* [emphasis added]."

These comments underscore the brutal neo-colonial character of the Afghan war. The occupying forces confront a hostile civilian population all of whom they regard as potential insurgents and therefore legitimate targets for aggression and collective punishment.

The NZDF, contradicting Mapp, continues to claim there is "no evidence" of civilian casualties from the raid. On March 26, Defence Force chief Tim Keating told the media that Operation Burnham did not take place in Naik and Khak Khuday Dad, but in another village some two kilometres away named Tirgiran.

Prime Minister Bill English, who replaced Key after the latter resigned last December, told Newstalk ZB on March 27: "We won't be having an inquiry into war crime allegations because whatever stories are in that book occurred somewhere else, not where the New Zealand operations were."

These statements do not withstand the most cursory examination. In addition to Mapp's admission that civilians were killed, the evidence shows that houses belonging to suspected insurgents targeted by the NZSAS were destroyed in Naik. Lawyers representing the families of those killed pointed out that Tirgiran village, where the NZDF claims Operation Burnham occurred, does not exist. Tirgiran is the name of the valley area where Naik and Khak Khuday Dad are located, and the location of the NZSAS raid matches the location of these villages.

The opposition Labour Party, the Greens and New Zealand First, along with Mapp and much of the media, have called for an inquiry into the 2010 raid. These calls are not motivated by any genuine concern for the victims of the war in Afghanistan. Rather, their aim is to whitewash the military.

Labour leader Andrew Little told Radio NZ on March 27 that *Hit and Run's* account appeared "credible," but he found the NZDF's rebuttal "equally credible." He said, "for the sake of their reputation and New Zealand's reputation, we still need to know what the facts are."

The previous Labour-led government, supported by the "left wing" Alliance Party, sent the NZSAS to Afghanistan as part of the US-led invasion. Labour also deployed more than 100 regular troops as a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Bamiyan. The Green Party opposed the SAS deployment but supported the PRT, on the pretext that it was engaged in "peacekeeping."

Stephenson previously exposed possible war crimes carried out by the NZSAS under the Labour government, including during a 2002 raid on the village of Bande Timur.

The entire political establishment supports New Zealand's alliance with US imperialism, on which the NZ ruling class relies to support its own neo-colonial ambitions in the South Pacific and elsewhere.

In preparation for future wars, the National Party government, backed by the opposition parties, is spending billions to upgrade the military. This includes a $46 million training facility for the NZSAS, opened last April. The government has also sent troops to the ongoing war in Iraq including, according to some reports, the NZSAS.

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