

More evidence of cover-up of Australian war crimes in Afghanistan

Mike Head

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Further examples are emerging of the official whitewash of illegal killings and other abuses committed by Australian Special Forces units as part of the US-led invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Among the latest reports is one that soldiers shot dead at least five civilian protesters and injured six demonstrating outside an Australian base in 2010.

This evidence, the latest in a long series of damning disclosures, underscores why the Australian government is intensifying its efforts to suppress media freedom by threatening and prosecuting whistleblowers and journalists in order to prevent the exposure of war crimes and other abuses.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported this week that documents and video footage it had obtained from the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) showed that protesters were gunned down near Australia's Forward Operating Base Mirwais in the Chora Valley on September 17, 2010.

The incident at the base, 20 kilometres northeast of the Uruzgan provincial capital Tarin Kot, typified both the hostility of most Afghans toward the occupying forces and the brutal character of the military occupation itself.

The ABC said a three-minute video showed hundreds of men and boys approaching the base, some carrying sticks and flags, before dozens of rocks were thrown at the roof of the base. Australian soldiers are heard shouting in alarm before reporting that smoke grenades would be used to disperse the crowd. The video ended before the soldiers began opening fire on the demonstrators.

The AIHRC files contradict official claims, issued shortly after the incident, that a soldier shot only one protester who had "aimed an AK-47" at troops. A

Defence Department spokesperson this week still insisted it was a legitimate act of self-defence in response to "rioters." He stated: "An investigation by the Commanding Officer into the incident found that Australian and Coalition soldiers acted appropriately and in accordance with their Rules of Engagement."

The ABC reported that the latest material was among more than 90 investigation files it had obtained from the Uruzgan office of the AIHRC. Uruzgan was the operational area for Australia's Special Operations Task Group, which consisted of about 320 commandos. The ABC has chosen not to release the material but instead reported only selected cases.

In one, a 2012 operation, Australian troops killed two villagers and left others maimed in Sarkhume, a small farming community. Residents complained to local authorities but an internal Australian investigation classified the victims as combatants and ruled that the raid was justified.

In a 2013 incident, Australian Special Air Service (SAS) forces entered a house in the village of Ala Balogh, on the fringes of Tarin Kot, and killed Bismillah Jan Acadi and his son Sadiqullah, 6, who were both sleeping and unarmed. This contradicted the findings of a military investigation that the man had pointed a gun at a SAS trooper.

These are only the most recent documents, leaked or obtained from official sources, disclosing illegal killings—including of captured detainees—torture, desecration of bodies and other war crimes committed by Australian units. By all indications, this is only the tip of an iceberg.

In 2017, the ABC published, also in a redacted form, what it called the "Afghan Files." They covered at least 10 incidents between 2009 and 2013 in which military investigators summarily cleared Special Forces soldiers

of killing civilians, including children, and other war crimes, such as severing the hands of dead alleged Taliban fighters.

The accumulating evidence points to systemic abuses, clearly authorised and shielded at the highest levels. This cannot be explained, as the corporate media has claimed, as the conduct of isolated “bad apples” or “poor culture” among the troops. These barbarities underscore the inherently criminal character of the wars of occupation in Afghanistan and Iraq to secure US control over the strategic and resource-rich Middle East and Central Asian region.

As a consequence, the military units involved treat the entire populations as the enemy. Moreover, their rules of engagement permit such killings, and military inquiries invariably find that soldiers acted within these rules.

The Special Forces have been the primary ground force in Australian military operations since the Vietnam War. That is precisely because they specialise in secretive targeted killings and assaults. They are also the frontline units that would be called out within Australia, with “shoot-to-kill” powers, to deal with “domestic violence”—civil unrest—under expanded military call-out legislation passed by parliament last year.

In August, the Liberal-National Coalition government announced extra funding of \$3 billion over 20 years to upgrade their weapons and resources. Prime Minister Scott Morrison insisted that the “wonderful” commandos had “an impeccable record” in “Afghanistan in particular.” He effectively pre-empted a long-delayed inquiry by Paul Brereton, a judge and Army Reserve major-general, who reportedly has interviewed more than 200 witnesses of the killings, torture and abuses.

This week’s revelations will fuel the widespread opposition to the mounting persecution of whistleblowers and journalists. An ex-military lawyer, David McBride, is currently in the first stages of a trial, behind closed doors in Canberra, for allegedly leaking information to journalists about the Afghan war crimes coverup.

An unprecedented police raid on the ABC’s Sydney headquarters in June seized documents related to the “Afghan Files,” acting on a warrant against reporter Dan Oakes, producer Sam Clark and director of news

Gaven Morris. A day earlier, police spent hours ransacking the Canberra home of a News Corp political editor, Annika Smethurst for reporting on secretive government plans to expand the domestic surveillance powers of the intelligence agencies.

Despite public outrage, the government has refused to rule out prosecuting these journalists. This blatant attack on journalism is a warning of how far governments in Australia and globally will go to block the truth about war crimes and mass surveillance.

While the establishment media outlets this week launched a prominent “right to know” campaign against aspects of this assault on press freedom, none have come to the defence of Australian journalist and publisher Julian Assange. Yet, it was the arrest of the WikiLeaks founder in London on April 11 that gave the global green light for such repression.

Assange’s imprisonment was rapidly followed by the Trump administration’s application for his extradition to face jail for life, if not execution, on US Espionage Act charges. Assange’s only “crime” has been to expose the killings, regime-change operations and global spying committed by the US and its allies, including Australia.

As the WSWS has warned, these developments are directly related to covering up, not just the past crimes of the US and its allies, but preparing for even greater ones as social and political unrest grows and Washington escalates its economic war and military confrontation with China.

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