

New Zealand military's unexploded bombs killed Afghan civilians

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22 November 2019

New Zealand's military was responsible for 17 civilian deaths and injuries, including the deaths of 7 children, caused by unexploded bombs left behind at firing ranges in Bamyan province, Afghanistan. The deaths, reported by *Stuff Circuit* on November 17, had been kept secret for years by the NZ Defence Force (NZDF) and successive governments led by the National Party and the Labour Party.

More than 100 New Zealand troops were stationed in Bamyan from 2003 to 2013 in a so-called Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). Successive NZ governments also deployed elite Special Air Service (SAS) forces to assist the US occupation. NZ SAS troops have been implicated in war crimes, including the killing of civilians in a 2010 raid.

The PRT was falsely presented as a "peacekeeping" mission aimed at winning "hearts and minds" by building infrastructure such as roads and schools. Very little information was ever made public about the PRT's operations, while the SAS actions were completely shrouded in secrecy.

Journalist Nicky Hager revealed in 2011 that the Bamyan PRT was fully integrated into US military operations aimed at suppressing Afghan resistance to the puppet regime of Hamid Karzai. It served as a base for the CIA to coordinate its activities, guarded by NZ troops.

The failure to clear unexploded bombs reflects the NZDF's callous disregard for the impoverished local population, who the occupying forces viewed with hostility. The multitude of war crimes by the US and its allies, including Britain, Australia, Germany and NZ, stem from the predatory, imperialist character of the war. Using the false pretext of fighting terrorism, Washington aimed to dominate the strategic and resource-rich region, at the expense of its main rivals

Russia and China.

Journalist Paula Penfold and others from *Stuff Circuit* interviewed survivors and relatives of those killed and wounded at New Zealand's firing ranges for an online documentary, "Life and Limb." They also spoke with Afghan officials, doctors and Patrick Fruchet, head of the United Nations Mine Action Service in Afghanistan.

The UN documented nine incidents in which people were injured or killed at the Bamyan firing ranges used by the PRT. These cover a vast area of 39 square kilometres, which local villagers must cross on foot to herd goats and gather firewood for heating and cooking.

In the most horrific explosion on April 1, 2014, seven children aged between 5 and 12 were killed by an unexploded bomb used by the US-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Fruchet stated: "In Bamyan, what that means is New Zealand [is responsible]."

An eighth child, Mohammad, who narrowly escaped dying in the blast, fled the scene in terror and spent three days hiding in a cave. When he was found he was so traumatised he did not recognise his family.

The three mothers of the children killed, Baskul, Tohina and Raina, told *Stuff* that no one from the NZ military or the government had contacted them or offered any compensation.

An earlier blast in February 2013, two months before the PRT left Afghanistan, injured Khaliq and his brother Sajad, aged 15 and 18, leaving them unable to do heavy farm work. Their mother Kubra went to the PRT and said: "My sons have been injured and the accident happened on the area that you are firing on." The NZDF denied responsibility.

The NZDF has repeatedly sought to wash its hands of

any responsibility. In 2017, NZDF told *Stuff* that there had only ever been one death on its firing ranges. A NZDF document leaked to *Stuff* this year said the firing range linked to the children's deaths in 2014 was "cleared" in October 2013 and there was "no evidence" the deaths were caused by a device used by NZ troops.

In fact, a certificate from the Afghan government showed only 2 percent of the firing range was cleared. Seven village elders wrote to authorities last year asking NZ to properly clear the area and supplied evidence of unexploded devices.

In response to NZDF claims that the ordnance might have been left behind by another country, Fruchet told *Stuff* that while it was "a mathematical possibility," given the NZ PRT used the Bamyang ranges for 10 years, it was not "a reasonable likelihood."

Penfold said in the documentary: "There's a saying in Afghanistan: that Afghan blood is cheap." He added that this was "hard to argue with," given the denials from NZDF, no compensation and no proper cleanup of the ranges nearly six years after soldiers left Bamyang.

Responding to the revelations, Chief of Army John Boswell told Radio NZ that, more than five years after leaving Afghanistan, the NZDF has now set aside funds to pay a contractor to clear the firing ranges. While stating that "we of course regret any deaths," he refused to admit that the NZDF was responsible.

Neither the military leadership nor Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern explained why the deaths had been kept secret from the public, even after Human Rights Watch raised the issue of New Zealand's responsibility in a letter to NZDF in June 2018.

Ardern criticised NZDF's delay in clearing the firing ranges and ordered the work to be done "in earnest." Due to winter snows, however, this may not be until April next year.

Seeking to cover for Labour's responsibility, former Labour Party Prime Minister Helen Clark hypocritically told *Stuff* the failure to clean up the Bamyang site was "reprehensible." It was the Clark government, which included the pseudo-left Alliance Party, which first sent the SAS to Afghanistan in 2001.

While no one is being held accountable for the 17 deaths and injuries caused by NZDF ordnance, New Zealand's involvement in criminal US-led wars continues. In June, the Ardern government extended New Zealand's troop deployments to Iraq, where about

100 NZ soldiers are stationed, and Afghanistan, where there are still about a dozen. The Labour-NZ First-Greens coalition has significantly strengthened New Zealand's alliance with the US over the past two years and supports its militarisation of the Pacific region as part of war preparations against China.



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