

“Four Corners” program exposes Australian war crimes in Afghanistan

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Last Monday, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Four Corners” program aired previously unreleased footage of Australian Special Air Service (SAS) troops committing war crimes in Afghanistan, including the murder of civilians and the brutalisation of others.

The program is the latest in a series of exposures of illegal actions by elite SAS troops over many years. As with the previous revelations, the material revealed by “Four Corners” has been met with worthless pledges of an official investigation and an attempt to suppress any broader discussion of the predatory, neo-colonial character of the ongoing occupation of the central Asian nation.

The most explosive footage was from an SAS dog handler’s helmet camera. It shows the unprovoked murder of Dad Mohammad, an unarmed civilian, by another SAS soldier near the village of Deh Jawz-e Hasanzai in Uruzgan province. Within three minutes of the patrol disembarking from a Black Hawk helicopter in late 2012, Mohammad had been shot.

The video shows one of the soldiers training his weapon on the young man and asking a superior officer: “Do you want me to drop this c***?” The soldier then shot Mohammad, who was lying in a prone position on the ground, three times at point blank range.

In an act of damage control, the Special Forces soldier responsible for Mohammad’s murder was suspended on Friday. He was referred to the Australian Federal Police (AFP) Commissioner by the Defence Minister. This followed a statement by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, declaring that any alleged war crimes would be investigated.

“Four Corners” revealed, however, that Mohammad’s death was investigated by the Australian Defence Force (ADF) shortly after the incident and was

deemed a “lawful killing.” Investigators claimed that killing was an act of self-defence because Mohammed was holding a radio. The footage, however, shows that the young man was holding rosary beads.

There is no doubt that the Labor Party, which was in government at the time, and the Liberal-National Coalition, were aware of the footage of the execution.

This only underscores the fact that the actions depicted were not just those of an individual soldier, but were part of an official policy of terrorising the Afghan population and suppressing widespread opposition to the occupation. It is not an accident that the cases uncovered by “Four Corners” followed a massive “surge” in Afghanistan carried out by the US administration of Barack Obama, along with the Australian Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

Braden Chapman, a former Signals Intelligence Officer who came forward to speak about crimes he witnessed being committed by the SAS during his deployment in 2012, made clear that the actions of the soldiers were known throughout military command. Chapman stated: “I just feel if people don’t come forward, it’s just going to be swept under the rug again.”

The whistleblower described a separate raid on a village in early 2012, where an SAS soldier shot at a civilian who had put his hands up. The man was shot in the chest twice and then in the head. Chapman said: “I was only five to ten metres behind him at the time... it was almost like target practice for that soldier.”

One of the soldier’s assault dogs began chewing on the head of the man who had been shot. Chapman commented: “I remember looking to the dog handler and saying ‘can you get this thing away from it’ And he’s was just like, ‘oh let him have a taste.’”

A representative of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) outlined an investigation conducted by the organisation into an SAS raid on the village of Sarkhume in March 2012. SAS soldiers had killed two civilians and injured seven others. Australian soldiers were reported to have tortured detainees.

In August 2012, SAS troops terrorised the village of Sola after an Afghan soldier shot three Australian military personnel. The SAS killed two civilians and injured a number of others.

“Four Corners” interviewed some of those who witnessed the atrocities. Rafiullah, a Sola villager, stated: “When my father finished his prayer, they kicked him in the head while he was trying to stand up. His turban fell down, and they stood him up. They tore his turban up into pieces and tied up the hands of the other people in the mosque. They beat me up very badly.”

Mohammad Qasim said that his brother Abdul Jalil was shot by a soldier in the mouth and heart. His father, Haji Mohammad, was shot in the side of the head and body.

The official defence investigation declared that Jalil had reached for an SAS soldier’s weapon and that Haji Mohammad was allegedly seen talking on a radio. Shahrzad Akbar from the AIHRC rejected these claims, stating that both of the victims were civilians who had made “no attempt to attack the Australian forces.”

The program demonstrated the way in which official Australian army regulations are used to carry out, and cover up, war crimes.

The regulations claim that soldiers are legally allowed to execute people who report on the soldiers’ positions via radio. Chapman told “Four Corners” that it was a common practice for soldiers to plant radios and weapons on the bodies of civilians they had killed. He stated: “I did see plenty [of radios] that were planted. Members of my troop used to joke about how the same serial number on an AK-47 was in every single photo of a dead Afghan.”

Chapman explained that when his deployment began, he was told by a senior SAS soldier: “I hope you’re ready and prepared for this deployment because you need to make sure that you’re okay with me putting a gun to someone’s head and pulling the trigger ‘cause I don’t want to read about it in 10 or so years.”

The “Four Corners” program is one of a series of reports documenting illegal acts by SAS troops in Afghanistan. Previous exposes have revealed evidence of civilian killings and the desecration of corpses.

In 2017, “The Afghan Files” published by the ABC reported at least 10 extrajudicial killings by the SAS. They included a young boy shot in Kandahar Province in 2012 and a teenager murdered in a separate incident.

The authorities have responded by establishing a series of secret investigations, including one under the direction of the Australian Federal Police and another being led by the ADF. Their aim is to cover up the extent of the crimes and ensure that the revelations do not impinge on Australian imperialism’s predatory military operations in Central Asia and the Middle East.

At the same time, the federal Coalition government, with the support of the Labor opposition and the entire political establishment, has spearheaded a witch-hunt of those who have exposed the crimes. David McBride, a former military lawyer who leaked the “Afghan Files” material to the ABC, faces decades in prison after being charged with violating secrecy laws last year.

In June 2019, the AFP, acting under government direction, raided the Sydney headquarters of the ABC over the “Afghan Files.” The unprecedented operation followed a separate raid targeting the home of Newscorp political editor Annika Smethurst, over a story she had written revealing government plans for expanded domestic spying. In both cases, the journalists may still face prosecution.

The sharpest expression of this assault on press freedom is the support of the Australian ruling elite for the imprisonment of WikiLeaks publisher and Australian citizen Julian Assange in Britain’s Belmarsh Prison. Assange, whose legal and democratic rights have been trampled on, is subject to extradition proceedings aimed at dispatching him to the US where he would face Espionage Act charges and life imprisonment for exposing war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan.



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