

Mounting evidence of systemic Australian war crimes in Afghanistan

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Revelations of atrocities committed by Australian units in Afghanistan are escalating, in the lead-up to the release of a sanitised official inquiry report into the war crimes, which have been covered-up for many years.

Increasingly, it is clear that the illegal killings and other abuses were systemic, not isolated incidents, and all those responsible should be placed on trial, not just the individual soldiers involved and the superiors who supported and protected them.

Above all, it should be the governments—both Liberal-National and Labor Party—that dispatched the troops to participate in the criminal US-led invasion and occupation of the impoverished country, and sent Special Forces units back repeatedly to pursue their murderous activities.

The cold-blooded executions of prisoners, and massacres of innocent civilians, cannot be explained away as the work of “bad apples” or a poor “culture” in the commando units that spearheaded the military operations in Afghan villages.

Special Forces soldiers were deployed to Afghanistan as many as 16 times, often despite known mental health and addiction problems, precisely because their task was to terrorise and intimidate the population. Their conduct flowed inevitably from the nature of the war—a brutal operation to crush all resistance to the imposition of US control over the country.

Two more damning reports emerged this week. First, video footage published by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) showed members of an Australian Special Air Services (SAS) patrol in Afghanistan talking about the execution of a “totally compliant” prisoner by one of their patrol members.

The metadata of the footage, taken from the helmet camera of one of the SAS soldiers, revealed that the conversation took place a day after an operation in the village of Shina, in Uruzgan Province, in mid-May 2012.

During that raid, by members of 3 Squadron SAS, three

Afghans were killed. The footage showed the soldiers declaring that a patrol member shot dead a detainee, referred to as a “PUC” (Person Under Confinement). The patrol commander said: “One of the engineers went, ‘Yeah it happened, he just took him around the corner and f***ing shot him’.”

Referring to SAS soldiers as “operators,” one patrol member commented: “You can’t do it in front of anyone but a f***ing operator.” The patrol commander replied: “You can’t do it in front of anyone. You don’t do it in front of anyone, it’s so wrong on so many levels.”

The exchange indicates that such killings were not unusual, but that care had to be taken to hide them from view.

In the second report, also aired on the ABC, a United States Marine Corps helicopter crew chief said Australian special forces shot and killed a bound Afghan prisoner in 2012, after being told he would not fit on the US aircraft coming to pick them up.

“So it was pretty apparent to everybody involved in that mission that they had just killed a prisoner that we had just watched them catch and hogtie,” he said.

The helicopter pilot indicated that this was not a one-off event. He said the Australian Special Forces were notorious among his fellow Marines for arbitrarily shooting Afghan civilians.

On another mission, one of his colleagues saw Australian commandos shoot someone as soon as they landed in a village. “They go down for a landing. As soon as the Aussies exit, there was somebody just sitting on a wall watching them land. They got off and popped the guy a few times in the chest.”

Recent months have seen growing numbers of such damning reports. In July, the ABC released leaked evidence that SAS military rotations in 2012 and early 2013 planted weapons on the bodies of civilians they had murdered, in an attempt to cover their tracks.

Earlier this year, the ABC broadcast video evidence clearly showing the point blank execution of unarmed Afghan farmer Dad Mohammad in May 2012, and then another murder of a disabled Afghan farmer in March 2012.

These reports add to mounting evidence of a protracted cover-up by the military chiefs and successive governments. That includes the Rudd Labor government and Greens-backed Gillard Labor governments, which were in office from 2007 to 2013, when the latest reported war crimes were committed.

This flood of evidence, after years of whitewash, is emerging on the eve of the current Liberal-National government's scheduled release of a heavily-redacted inquiry report by Paul Brereton, a New South Wales Supreme Court Justice and army reserve Major General. Over the past four years, Brereton has reportedly conducted over 250 interviews, relating to at least 55 alleged war crimes incidents between 2005 and 2016.

However, despite all this evidence, not a single person has yet been charged.

In fact, the only charge is against ex-military lawyer David McBride, who faces a closed-door trial for allegedly leaking classified documents to the ABC in 2017. Known as the "Afghan Files," they document at least 10 incidents of possible war crimes. The Federal Police also raided the ABC headquarters and two ABC journalists, Dan Oakes and Sam Clarke, were threatened with prosecution.

As far as the government and the military chiefs are concerned, the Brereton inquiry's task is to conduct a superficial "clean up" of the Special Forces, on which the Australian ruling class relies heavily for fighting in US-led wars. Far from constraining the deadly and repressive capacities of the Special Forces, "reforms" are being drafted to enhance those capacities.

In August 2019, as the war crimes evidence grew, Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government announced a major funding boost to the Special Forces. Project GREYFIN, a \$3 billion program over the next two decades, would start with "cutting-edge body armour, weapons, and parachuting and climbing systems."

This is part of a massive expansion of military spending, with \$575 billion allocated over a decade for new warplanes, vessels and hardware. The Special Forces are a critical spearhead of these plans for war, precisely because its members are highly trained and conditioned to kill.

At the August 2019 media conference, staged in front of

masked soldiers from the 2nd Commando Regiment at Sydney's Holsworthy military base, Morrison brushed aside a journalist's question about the war crimes. The prime minister hailed the "wonderful" commandos and insisted they had "an impeccable record" that was "simply extraordinary" in "Afghanistan in particular."

This effectively provided a preview of the intended outcome of Brereton's closed-door inquiry.

The systematic abuses by the Australian military are inseparable from the decades-long imperialist wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, conducted to attempt to secure US hegemony over the strategic and resource-rich Middle East and Central Asia region.

Now the bolstering of the Special Forces is central to the ever-closer incorporation of the Australian ruling class into further US war planning, centrally directed against China. Yesterday, Defence Minister Linda Reynolds announced Australia would no longer send a warship to the Middle East every year, and would withdraw from the US-led naval coalition patrolling the Strait of Hormuz, menacing Iran.

After three decades of participation in the criminal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Reynolds confirmed that the military's focus had shifted to the Asia-Pacific region, where Australia is on the frontline of the US confrontation with China.

The revamp of the Special Forces is also a preparation to deal with political and social discontent at home, amid rising economic inequality and preparations for war. In 2018, legislation was passed, with the opposition Labor Party's backing, to give governments and military generals greater powers to call out troops to combat "domestic violence."

There is only one way to end the violence and barbarism of Australia's military. It is bound up with the struggle against the drive to war and the fight to put an end to the capitalist system, which bears full responsibility for imperialist war and its crimes.



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