

Canada's military seeks to cover its tracks following damning report on Australian war crimes in Afghanistan

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In response to the release of a report exposing Australian military atrocities in Afghanistan, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) has doubled down on its long-running efforts to cover up its own war crimes in the region.

Released in mid-November by the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force (ADF), the report found there is “credible evidence” that Australian Special Forces murdered at least 39 Afghan civilians and prisoners between 2009 and 2013, and committed torture and other abuses, such as desecrating victims’ bodies. While the report was heavily redacted to cover up the details of these crimes, it did emerge that Special Forces units had a “blooding ritual,” in which newly deployed members shot and killed prisoners, then planted weapons on them to make it look like the victim was an enemy combatant.

The report also points to a history of military atrocities and coverups committed by the Australian Special Forces, from the Boer War at the beginning of the 20th century to the Vietnam War. At the same time, it absurdly claims that nothing was known about the systematic war crimes they carried out in Afghanistan above the unit commander level.

Upon the report’s public release, the Canadian military immediately sought to distance itself from its Australian allies. When pressed by the media on the nature of its collaboration and joint actions with Australian Special Forces units mentioned in the report, the CAF Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) conceded that its members did conduct missions with Australian Special Forces in Afghanistan—some of whom are now accused of war crimes. But it insisted that “no concerns were raised” by CAF personnel about the conduct of their Australian colleagues. “CANSOFCOM was not aware of these allegations until this inquiry was launched,” Major Amber Bineau told Global News.

The CAF’s attempt to whitewash Canada’s role in the military occupation of Afghanistan enjoys the full backing of the state and all parliamentary parties. Its goal is to gloss over Canada’s long-and well-documented record of complicity in torture and abuses during its decade-long (2001-2011) direct role in the neocolonial Afghan war.

Extensive evidence of Canadian war crimes

During the Canadian military’s Afghan intervention, evidence repeatedly surfaced of CAF complicity in torture. The CAF routinely and wilfully handed over Afghan detainees to the Afghanistan National Directorate of Security (NDS), the national secret service, although top-ranking Canadian military and government officials knew that it systematically employed torture.

The Liberal government of Paul Martin negotiated in 2005 an agreement with the Afghan government to transfer prisoners to its control, ignoring warnings raised by former diplomat Eileen Olexiuk that they would be at risk of torture. Her warnings were confirmed the following year, when the US State Department admitted that torture was widely used in Afghan prisons.

In 2009, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission office in Kandahar estimated that about one in three prisoners handed over by Canadians were “beaten or even tortured in local jails.” This was followed by the testimony of Canadian diplomat Richard Colvin, who told a parliamentary committee that it was likely that all the Afghans handed over to the NDS by the CAF “were tortured, beaten, subjected to electric shocks, denied sleep, and raped or otherwise sexually abused.” Colvin added, “Many were just local people—farmers, truck drivers, tailors, peasants; random human beings in the wrong place at the wrong time; young men in their fields and villages who were completely innocent but were nevertheless rounded up.”

The following year, Canadian Armed Forces’ interpreter Ahmadshah Malgarai testified before a parliamentary committee that the Canadian military “used the NDS as subcontractors for abuse and torture.”

If the Canadian military can continue to claim in the face of this mountain of evidence that they were not involved in war crimes in Afghanistan, it is due to the criminal role played by all of the parliamentary parties, from the Conservatives and Liberals to the New Democrats and Bloc Quebecois.

As popular anger grew following Colvin’s devastating testimony, Prime Minister Stephen Harper prorogued parliament for two months in December 2009 in order to shut down a parliamentary committee looking into the Afghan detainee issue.

When a Military Police Complaints Commission inquiry was initiated, the Conservative government used every tool in the box to obstruct the inquiry, which ultimately never heard a single witness. Harper and his ministers also refused to turn over documents relating to the Afghan detainee issue to the House of Commons, resulting in his minority government being found in contempt of parliament—the first time parliament had passed such a motion in almost a century.

Facing the prospect of a federal election in which the Canadian military’s crimes in Afghanistan would potentially loom large, which nobody within the political establishment wanted, the opposition Liberals, NDP, and Bloc Quebecois connived with the Tories to censor discussion of the issue. An agreement was reached for a tiny committee made up of two MPs from each party to review tens of thousands of documents related to the Afghan intervention under strict conditions and the threat of criminal prosecution if anything was publicly revealed without the approval of hand-picked jurists and the military. As the *World Socialist*

Web Site noted at the time, “By negotiating a deal with the government that largely removes the Afghan detainee issue from public debate and allows the government, bureaucracy and military to exert decisive influence over what the public learns about Canada’s involvement in war crimes, the opposition parties have become a party to the government-led cover-up.”

Less than a year later, after securing a parliamentary majority in the 2011 federal election, the Harper government shut the inquiry down, with barely a whimper of protest from the opposition.

In June 2016, a group of military police officers went public with accusations that high-ranking military police officers had ordered the abuse of innocent Afghan detainees—“husbands, fathers, farmers”—and that the CAF had systematically covered up their actions. The previous November, the Military Police Complaints Commission of Canada (MPCC) had launched an inquiry into their allegations, but the top brass of the military police refused to cooperate with the inquiry, including by denying the MPCC access to vital documents and recordings. Justin Trudeau and his Liberal government responded by spurning calls for a public inquiry. Leading the government effort to cover up CAF war crimes, Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan, who had himself served as a CAF intelligence officer in Afghanistan, declared, “Throughout military operations in Afghanistan, the government of Canada ensured individuals detained by the Canadian Armed Forces were treated humanely and handled, transferred or released in accordance with our obligations under international law.”

At this time the NDP joined in the calls for a public inquiry into the detainee issue. But it supported Canada’s role in the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan—including agreeing under its 2008 coalition agreement with the Liberals to serve in a government pledged to waging war there till 2011. Moreover, just like their ostensible Liberal and Conservative opponents, the NDP backs Canada’s continued participation in US military-strategic offensives around the globe.

The criminality of Canadian imperialism

The latest denial by the Canadian military of its involvement in war crimes, which has gone unchallenged within the political establishment, underscores that the entire political elite supports predatory imperialist wars and has no commitment to basic democratic rights.

Former Canadian Defence Minister David Collenette recently told the *Guardian* that the war crimes committed by the Canadian Airborne Regiment while stationed in Somalia during 1992-93, including the torture and murder of Somali teenager Shidane Arone, “revealed a systemic problem with the institution from which the individuals came.”

Since then, ruling elites in Canada and the other major imperialist powers have undertaken a pronounced turn toward militarism, vastly expanded the power and reach of the national-security apparatus, criminalized social opposition, and eviscerated democratic rights.

The Canadian military and government’s involvement in war crimes is not an aberration of an otherwise humanitarian foreign policy. Rather, it is an inevitable outcome of the neocolonial and imperialist character of the wars that Canada waged in Afghanistan, continues to wage in the Middle East, and is preparing for with a more than 70 percent 10-year hike in military spending.

The US-led invasion of Afghanistan was the opening volley in the “war on terror”—a phoney war that for the next 15 years or more would serve as the pretext for Washington to wage an endless series of wars, aimed at offsetting its global economic decline, that have killed 12 million people and displaced 59 million.

Canada’s ruling elite was quick to embrace the “war on terror.” It did so with the triple aim of advancing its own predatory global interests; strengthening its alliance with Washington under conditions where Canada’s role as America’s principal economic partner was being undermined by China and Mexico; and justifying increased repressive powers for the state. The military and political establishment also welcomed the Afghan war as the opportunity to jettison once and for all the liberal nationalist myth of Canada as a “peace keeper”—a myth that served to bolster popular support for the Canadian state, but became an encumbrance to pursuing the more aggressive foreign policy demanded by Canadian capital.

Since participating in the October 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, Canada has been engaged in almost perpetual war in alliance with Washington. This includes the Canadian Armed Forces’ decade-long leading role in the Afghan counter-insurgency war, its participation in the 2004 overthrow of Haiti’s elected president and the 2011 “regime-change” war in Libya, and its operations, ongoing since 2014, in Iraq and Syria. Canada is also deeply integrated into the US military-strategic offensives against Russia and China.

At the same time, core democratic rights, including the right to remain silent and the presumption of innocence, have been grossly undermined, while the national security apparatus has been handed extraordinary powers of surveillance and intimidation with the support of the entire ruling elite.

Canada has become the second biggest arms exporter to the Middle East, where Canadian-made armoured vehicles had been used by the despotic Saudi regime to violently suppress domestic protests and fuel its war with Yemen. In October, news broke that Canadian defence contractors manufactured components for Turkish drones used in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

As the pandemic accelerates and the economic crisis and social misery deepen, due to the government’s homicidal back-to-work and back-to-school policies and bailout of the financial elite, the ruling class fears social revolt. Consequently, it is turning more and more toward authoritarian forms of rule.

Under these conditions, the military is emerging as an increasingly significant and repressive force in Canadian society. In August, a leaked document revealed that the military responded to the pandemic by initiating “information operations” based on methods the CAF had developed during the Afghan war. Draft proposals, subsequently withdrawn, called for soldiers to broadcast government-approved propaganda on social media and hastily established radio stations with the aim of “shaping” public opinion. The order also called for “exploiting information,” i.e., mass surveillance, to detect possible indications of civil unrest.

It should come as no surprise in this context that no major political figure in Canada from any party has challenged the Canadian military’s outrageous and demonstrably false claim that its personnel were not involved in war crimes in Afghanistan, or demanded an inquiry into the actions of Canada’s Special Forces there. As loyal defenders of Canadian imperialism and the capitalist state, the political establishment, from the right-wing Tories to the nominally “left” New Democrats and Greens, have no interest in exposing the atrocities and war crimes of the Canadian military.



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