

What price an Afghan life? Report lists hundreds of civilians killed by UK in Afghanistan

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A recent study by Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) has found that the British Ministry of Defence (MoD) has paid compensation for the deaths of at least 289 Afghan civilians killed and 240 injured between 2006 to 2013 during the UK's military operations.

This is the first official indication of the number of civilian deaths caused by British troops as the UK government has sought for years to systematically suppress the extent of casualties, including lying about the existence of its own documents and emails revealing official concerns about the killing of innocent Afghans.

The British government frequently reports that 457 British soldiers lost their lives and 616 soldiers suffered serious or very serious injuries but has failed to report Afghan casualties or to provide any estimate of the overall harm caused by British operations in its largest deployment since World War II. Yet the war has led to between 170,000 and a quarter of a million Afghans dead, hundreds of thousands of wounded, and millions forced from their homes.

The military intervention in Afghanistan, planned well in advance of the bombing of the twin towers in New York in 2001, was not launched to prosecute a "war on terrorism" but rather to project US military power into Central and South Asia. The US was intent on seizing control of a country rich in untapped mineral resources that bordered on the oil-rich former Soviet republics of the Caspian Basin, as well as China, with the support and cover of its NATO allies.

Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair seized the opportunity to push himself forward as US President George W. Bush's chief emissary for the "global war on terror." In so doing, he sought to bolster Britain's much-diminished global position while preventing Washington from pursuing a unilateralist course and the European

Union from developing a policy that would leave Britain out in the cold.

Blair, like Bush, has never been held to account for his role in ordering the invasion of Afghanistan and later that of Iraq, which gave rise to unspeakable crimes, including torture, "extraordinary rendition," the indefinite military detention of US-proclaimed "enemy combatants" at Guantanamo Bay and the cold-blooded murders of civilians.

With the typical duplicity, UK junior Armed Forces Minister James Heapey claimed that the cost of Operation Herrick was £22.2 billion, omitting to say that this operation, which officially ended in 2015, covers only part of the 20-year war in Afghanistan. Frank Ledwidge, an academic at the University of Portsmouth, who wrote *Investment in Blood* in 2013, believes that this will have risen to a staggering £38-£39 billion now, without considering the ongoing costs of caring for wounded veterans.

According to Brown University's Cost of War project, around 47,245 Afghan civilians suffered violent deaths as a direct result of the conflict between 2001-2019. The UK-based charity Airwars estimated, using data from the United Nations and *Nation* magazine, that a minimum of 4,815 civilian deaths were the direct result of US airstrikes.

In the case of Britain, the charity AOAV, which analysed nearly 7,000 compensation claims paid out by the Ministry of Defence (MoD), found that of the 289 payouts, 84 were for children, and at least 43 were for females. The MoD only made the compensation claims available in response to numerous Freedom of Information (FoI) requests.

AOAV has a well-founded belief that this number of civilian deaths linked to British military operations in

Helmand province is likely to be an underestimate of the real numbers, given the difficulty Afghan citizens would have had in applying for military compensation. Records show that the MoD rejected most compensation claims submitted by the families, denying responsibility for 885 claims of death and 285 claims of injury.

Overall, the British military paid out a miserly £688,000 for 289 deaths, an average compensation of £2,380. Even this inflates the value placed on an Afghan life, as some of these payouts were combined with injuries and property damage.

One family received £586.42 for the death of their ten-year-old son in December 2009 and another just £104.17 for a confirmed fatality and property damage in February 2008, less than others received for a damaged crane (£873), for the death of six donkeys “when they wandered on to the rifle range” (£662), for “Warthog damage” in Nahr-e-Saraj, Helmand (£240) and less than the £110 for a lost mobile phone in Camp Bastion.

The sums paid were far lower than for claims in Cyprus and other European countries. AOVAV stated that Britain paid out 36 percent more in the two decades of the War on Terror to claims originating in Cyprus (£8.44 million) than in Afghanistan (£6.18 million). The MoD paid out more in Cyprus (£1.04 million), where most claims were for crop or livestock damage, or in Europe (£1.17 million), mostly for traffic accidents, than for the 289 civilian deaths in Afghanistan (£688,000).

The MoD also recorded payments to operations involving the elite Special Air Service (SAS), which has been accused of involvement in the execution of civilians, including paying £3,634 to the family of three Afghan farmers allegedly killed in cold blood in 2012 within three weeks of the incident. This unusually prompt payment was recorded as an “assistance payment to be made to calm local atmospherics [sic].”

AOVAV say that based on documents they obtained from the MoD under an FoI, 17 British military personnel have been charged in relation to civilian casualties and 15 prosecuted in relation to the 529 deaths and injuries for whom the MoD paid compensation.

What happened to Sergeant Alexander Blackman is illustrative of British imperialism’s attitudes to such crimes.

In 2011, Blackman was filmed by a fellow soldier shooting a man, already seriously injured by gunfire from an Apache helicopter, in the chest at close range with a 9mm pistol. After he shot the prisoner, Blackman was captured on camera stating, “There you are. Shuffle off

this mortal coil you c***. It’s nothing you wouldn’t do to us.” He turned to those watching and stated, “Obviously this doesn’t go anywhere, fellas. I just broke the Geneva Convention.”

The Geneva Conventions governing the treatment of captured and wounded prisoners of war requires that those who have laid down their arms or who cannot fight due to sickness, wounds or detention should be “treated humanely, without any adverse distinction founded on race, colour, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria.”

In 2013, Blackman was found guilty of murder by a military court and sentenced to 10 years in prison, reduced on appeal to eight years. In 2017, five senior judges at London’s Court Martial Appeal Court downgraded the original finding from murder to manslaughter, accepting a plea of diminished responsibility and allowing him to be released from prison after serving just three and a half years.

The government has introduced legislation that will put a five-year limit on prosecutions for soldiers serving outside the UK. With its “presumption against prosecution” that gives the green light to future war crimes, including the mass murder of civilians, the law will free the military from all constraints.

It is not just those soldiers who perpetrated these crimes on behalf of the imperialist powers, but crucially those at the very top of the political and military ladder who planned and executed this criminal war, that have escaped punishment.

Instead, the only two people who have faced criminal repercussions are those who reported the crimes: Chelsea Manning, who has endured a decade of persecution, and Julian Assange, who—after first being arrested in London over in 2010—is imprisoned in Britain’s maximum-security Belmarsh Prison awaiting a US appeal to the Supreme Court for his extradition to the US where he faces 175 years imprisonment under the Espionage Act.



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