

# BBC's Panorama exposes British war crimes in Afghanistan

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BBC TV's flagship "Panorama" programme has revealed further evidence that UK special forces killed unarmed detainees in Afghanistan and planted weapons near their bodies to justify their crimes.

The BBC also found evidence that senior officers, including recently retired General Sir Mark Carleton-Smith who headed the Special Forces at the time, were aware of concerns within the Special Air Service (SAS) but failed to pass on evidence to the military police.

Last Tuesday night's screening of *SAS Death Squads Exposed: A British War Crime?* broadcast interviews and evidence based on official files from police investigations and a four-year probe showing that one SAS unit in Helmand province had killed 54 people in suspicious circumstances between 2010 and 2011. The unit's tour of duty resulted in a total Afghan death toll more than double that number, yet none of its members sustained any injuries in the raids, indicating their lives had not been at risk.

The Ministry of Defence had been forced to hand over a tranche of emails and documents during a long-running hearing of a civil case in the High Court brought by Afghan citizen Saifullah Yar into the deaths of four family members at the hands of the SAS, after previously suggesting it had no such documents. Further documents were obtained via Freedom of Information requests.

The documents, written by SAS officers and military personnel, provide evidence of war crimes. They show that while the government claimed—and continues to claim—that there was no credible evidence of criminality, the evidence had been sitting in Whitehall all this time.

According to the 1977 Geneva Conventions, shooting civilians is only lawful if they are participating directly in hostilities. Under UK domestic law, a soldier can use force to defend him/herself and others, including lethal force, only if it is reasonable in the circumstances, while the failure of a commanding officer to inform the military

police if he or she becomes aware of potential war crimes is a criminal offence.

The airing of *SAS Death Squads Exposed: A British War Crime?* comes at a sensitive time amid furious claims by Britain that Russia's armed forces have committed multiple war crimes in Ukraine and calls for Russia's referral to the International Criminal Court.

Last week, the MoD lambasted the BBC for engaging in "irresponsible, incorrect" journalism by broadcasting the allegations, arguing it could put British soldiers at risk because it "jumps to unjustified conclusions" with its claims that both investigations by military police resulted in no prosecutions. It said, "Neither investigation found sufficient evidence to prosecute. Insinuating otherwise is irresponsible, incorrect and puts our brave armed forces personnel at risk, both in the field and reputationally."

Members of parliament have called for an urgent investigation into the BBC's "deeply disturbing" claims.

Tobias Ellwood, Conservative chair of the House of Commons Defence Select Committee, said, "The optics of this don't look good," and called on armed forces minister James Heappey to explain the situation. Heappey gave the now standard government response that the claims "have been investigated, I believe, twice and on each occasion haven't met the evidential threshold."

This was a reference to the launch in 2014 of Operation Northmoor by the Royal Military Police, an investigation into 657 allegations of abuse, mistreatment, and killings at the hands of British forces that was wound down in 2017 and closed in 2019, with the MoD finding no evidence of criminality. The BBC said members of Operation Northmoor disputed the MoD's conclusion that there was no case to answer.

Heappey pledged yet another whitewash investigation, should the BBC's evidence justify it.

The programme noted a "quite incredible" pattern of "strikingly similar reports" of SAS operations, aimed at

killing or capturing Taliban members, in which the SAS shot and killed Afghan men during night raids. After capturing family groups, soldiers would force one of them to enter the building and then shoot him, claiming the man had produced a hand grenade or an AK47 rifle. Typically, the number of rifles were far fewer than the number of men detained, while the position of the bullets in the walls indicated that the victim was lying on the ground and not in a position to fire a rifle.

So standardised were the reports that they begged the question whether the raids amounted to war crimes. Internal emails described one incident as the “latest massacre.” A senior SAS officer warned in a secret memo that it sounded like a “deliberate policy” of unlawful killings. But following the commissioning of a rare formal review of the squadron’s tactics, the investigating officer sent to Afghanistan accepted the SAS version of events at face value.

According to the BBC’s sources, SAS units competed to get the highest number of kills on their six-month tours of duty, with the unit at the centre of the investigation seeking a higher body count than its predecessor.

Colonel Oliver Lee, a commander of the Royal Marines in Afghanistan in 2011, told the BBC its allegations of misconduct were “incredibly shocking” and merited a public inquiry. He said the apparent failure by special forces leaders to disclose evidence was “completely unacceptable.”

Britain’s Special Forces, which have carried out operations in 19 countries since 2011, are not subject to any parliamentary oversight, reporting only to the MoD. With their exemption from Freedom of Information requests, any information that does become available is leaked by whistleblowers who risk serious criminal charges.

The killings and cover-up flow inexorably from the filthy and criminal nature of the war carried out by British imperialism, starting from the very top. It was Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair who lined up “shoulder to shoulder” with US President George W. Bush in the US-led coalition’s illegal war of aggression and occupation of Afghanistan, persuading NATO to support the war on behalf of US and British imperialism. He never retracted his support, maintaining it was a war to bring democracy to Afghanistan. Last August, he berated President Joe Biden for the “tragic, dangerous, unnecessary” US withdrawal from the country.

The illegal invasion and occupation of Afghanistan has led to more than 175,000 deaths, although the real toll,

including deaths caused indirectly by the war, is closer to a million, with hundreds of thousands of wounded and millions more forced to flee their homes. One of the poorest countries on the planet, its population suffers grinding deprivation and oppression.

While the British government claims the military costs of Operation Herrick were £23 billion, Frank Ledwidge, author of *Investment in Blood* published in 2013, estimates the total cost is now around £40 billion, including the human and financial cost of long-term care for more than 2,600 British troops injured, more than 5,000 “psychologically injured” and the pittance paid in compensation to the families of the 7,000 civilians the UK government has officially admitted were killed, injured or lost their homes due to its operations.

The UK government had sought to introduce a statutory “presumption against prosecution” for British soldiers over events five or more years old, giving the green light to future war crimes, including the mass murder of civilians. Ministers were forced to concede that the five-year limit would not include war crimes in the legislation enacted last year.

It is not just those soldiers who perpetrated these crimes on behalf of the imperialist powers who have gone unpunished. Crucially, those at the very top of the political and military ladder who planned and executed a criminal war have escaped punishment. Blair, like Bush, has never been held to account for his role in ordering the invasion of Afghanistan or his central role in the Iraq war in 2003.

The only two people who have faced criminal repercussions are those who reported war crimes: Chelsea Manning, who has endured a decade of persecution, and Julian Assange, who is imprisoned in Britain’s maximum-security Belmarsh Prison and faces extradition to the US to serve 175 years imprisonment under the Espionage Act.



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