

Inquiry hears evidence of war crimes by UK Special Forces in Afghanistan

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25 October 2023

The “Independent Inquiry relating to Afghanistan”, which is investigating unlawful killings by British soldiers, has heard evidence of war crimes and the deletion of evidence relating to these crimes and their whitewashing through internal inquiries.

The inquiry opened October 9 at the Royal Courts of Justice in London into alleged extra-judicial killings by the Special Air Service (SAS) in Afghanistan. The SAS is the main special forces unit of the British Army.

In his opening statement chairman and presiding judge, Lord Justice Haddon Cave, said, “The allegations... are extremely grave”. They were “first, that numerous extra-judicial killings were carried out by British Special Forces in Afghanistan during the period mid-2010 to mid-2013; second, that these were covered up at all levels over the past decade; third, that the five-year inquiry carried out by the Royal Military Police was not fit for purpose.”

As part of British military support for the US-led occupation of Afghanistan (2001-2021), the SAS—like the elite special forces of the US and other NATO powers—carried out hundreds of deliberate detention operations (DDOs) or night raids. These resulted in scores of unlawful killings and were predominantly carried out in rural areas of Helmand province. They were intended to terrorize and pacify the Afghan population as an insurgency developed across the country against the corrupt US-puppet regime of Hamid Karzai.

The inquiry is focussing on 54 alleged killings of Afghan civilians during DDOs by UK special forces between 2010 and 2013, including:

- **November 30, 2010**—Mohammed Ibrahim was killed in an SAS raid. Ibrahim’s family insist he was an innocent civilian who worked as an Afghan government official between 2001 and 2007.

- **February 7, 2011**—Nine men were killed in their beds during a raid in Makati Dashta in northern Helmand. Families of the victims say the men were shot “most likely while asleep”. The killings are believed to have occurred as several families gathered before a wake. The SAS said they

had fired in self-defence having been fired upon.

- **February 9, 2011**—Eight Afghans were killed in a guesthouse during a DDO carried out by special forces in Khanano, in the Musa Qala district of northern Helmand. Family members insist they were innocent civilians and have suggested that fatal injuries sustained by the men, and the positions in which they were found, indicate they were shot by trained soldiers who were facing them. Some of the victims still had their hands bound.

- **February 16, 2011**—Four Afghan civilians including a respected local elder were killed during a night raid in Gawahargin, a village in the Nawa District of southern Helmand. Although special forces assert that they fired in self-defence (when the victims produced a hand grenade from behind a curtain or an AK-47 assault rifle) the families insist that all four deceased were innocent civilians, had no association with the Taliban and that there were no weapons in the home. Following this incident, an Afghan military partner unit apparently made it known that they no longer wished to collaborate with UK forces.

- **October 18, 2012**—four teenagers were killed during a DDO in the village of Loi Bagh, in central Helmand. The SAS say they found weapons during a subsequent search of the property. The family insists all the deceased were innocent civilians, had nothing to do with the Taliban, and that there were no weapons.

- **August 7, 2012**—The SAS killed Hussain Uzbekzai, his wife Ruqquia Haleem, and severely injured their two children Imran and Bilal while they slept during a raids on the village of Shesh Aba, in Nimruz province.

Holding the inquiry was forced out of the government following a July 2022 broadcast of an episode of the BBC *Panorama* documentary series, *SAS Death Squads Exposed: A British War Crime?* It contained 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. None of

the unit's members sustained any injuries in the raids, indicating they had faced no threats to their own safety.

The government denounced the BBC for engaging in "irresponsible, incorrect" journalism. But within 24 hours it was forced to initiate a fresh investigation into the allegations, in which the BBC and other organisations were asked to share information, and which led to the announcement of a statutory inquiry.

The inquiry proceedings substantiated allegations that UK special forces had an unstated policy of executing "fighting age" Afghan males, whether they posed a threat or not. This was detailed by lead counsel Oliver Glasgow KC, who cited an internal letter written in March 2011 by a senior military figure [name redacted], which read:

"During these operations it was said that 'all fighting age males are killed on target' regardless of the threat they posed, this included those not holding weapons. It was also indicated that fighting age males were being executed on target inside compounds, using a variety of methods after they had been restrained. In one case it was mentioned that a pillow was put over the head of an individual before being killed with a pistol. It was implied that photos would be taken of the deceased alongside weapons that the 'fighting age male' may not have had in their possession when they were killed. The conversation implied that the intention of regular operations was to pacify areas in Helmand by destroying all the medium and low level Taliban Command chain and facilitators, using any means possible."

UK special forces were also accused of planting weapons on their victims.

Allegations of cover-ups of illegal activity and inadequate investigations by the Royal Military Police (RMP) are also being examined. Two RMP investigations, Operation Castro and Operation Northmoor, are expected to be scrutinised.

Operation Northmoor was set up in 2014 to begin examining what became of 675 allegations of detainee abuse by UK armed forces. Northmoor eventually involved over 120 military police officers. Its detectives investigated evidence that one SAS squadron had killed dozens of unarmed Afghan detainees and civilians.

Operation Castro investigated the killing of four young Afghans in Helmand in October 2012 by a member of the SAS. The RMP referred three soldiers to the Service Prosecuting Authority—including the shooter on four counts of murder. Neither investigation resulted in any prosecutions.

The current inquiry intends to examine whether the conclusion to Operation Northmoor ["there is no cogent or tangible evidence to prove or support that unlawful killing took place."] was correct. It would be necessary to "scrutinise the way in which Operation Northmoor was

handled, both by those in charge as well as by those who carried out the investigation itself."

The inquiry was told that in December 2016, when RMP officials attempted to collect data from UK Special Forces headquarters intended for Operation Northmoor, they were told this data had been deleted. According to inquiry transcripts, the senior investigating officer recorded the following entry in his policy log: "It appears that [UK Special Forces headquarters] have deleted material from the preserved ITS1 server. That deletion process has been conducted in such a way that it is irreversible and impossible to determine what has been deleted. This is in direct disobedience to our demands to preserve the data in its entirety."

Glasgow said, "Accordingly, after nearly 15 months of negotiations to recover the entire data set from the UK special forces server, the SIO [senior investigating officer] was instructed not to take any steps to secure what was promised and not to investigate why it was that [the UK special forces headquarters] had permitted data to be deleted."

Inquiry officials have said that the judge and his legal staff have no plans to visit Afghanistan. Iain Overton, executive director for Action on Armed Violence, who has been involved in investigating the allegations, said, "The inquiry failing to go to Afghanistan is like a homicide unit not visiting the murder scene," noting that journalists had been able to visit since the Taliban takeover.

Whatever is revealed by the inquiry, commissioned by then Defence Secretary Ben Wallace and Defence Minister Andrew Murrison, it will protect the guilty. The Independent Inquiry relating to Afghanistan is operating within the legal framework provided by the Inquiries Act 2005, which states that one of its "principles" is that "It is not part of the Inquiry's function to determine civil or criminal liability of named individuals or organisations."



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