

Ottawa suppresses report exposing Canadian military's role in Afghan war crimes

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Recently-retired diplomat and whistle blower Richard Colvin has provided detailed evidence showing that in the first year (2006-2007) of its counter-insurgency mission in Kandahar, Afghanistan, Canada's military secretly detained and transferred over 1,000 people to be tortured by the US-backed regime of Hamid Karzai.

Colvin, who for 6 years held senior diplomatic posts in Kandahar and the Canadian embassies in Kabul and Washington, threw the Conservative Harper government into crisis in 2009 when he testified before a parliamentary committee that the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) regularly transferred detainees to the notoriously brutal prisons of the neocolonial regime installed in the aftermath of the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan.

His new allegations, which are documented in an unpublished 1,000-page report submitted to his superiors at the Ministry of Global Affairs thirteen months ago and subsequently shared with reporters from the *Globe and Mail*, are even more damning than his initial testimony. Colvin's evidence, gathered from "hundreds of public and private sources, including reports from public inquiries, official military statements and memoirs by former soldiers" shows that the CAF committed systematic war crimes in Kandahar, which the military command and the Harper government desperately tried to conceal.

The further exposure of these imperialist war crime comes as Canadian imperialism and its US allies are directly complicit in criminal acts on an even greater scale. Since October 2023, Ottawa and Washington have fully endorsed the Zionist regime's genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza and worked to ruthlessly silence all opposition to it. The genocide is part of American imperialism's drive to consolidate its hegemony over the entire oil-rich Middle East, which intensified last month with the waging of an illegal war on Iran. Canada backed the Israeli and American bombardment to the hilt.

Colvin's research in the face of official hostility

Based on over a decade of research carried out in his private time, Colvin's document reportedly presents a detailed account of the military mission and the multiple investigations into the CAF's role in the torture of Afghan detainees that were obstructed and ultimately aborted under the Harper Conservatives, then unceremoniously buried by the Liberals under Justin Trudeau. Though he is no opponent of Canadian imperialism, Colvin persisted in his work to bring to light the CAF's war crimes despite the efforts of the entire political establishment to suppress the issue.

Beginning in the spring of 2006, Canada's military assumed a leading role in the vicious counter-insurgency fighting in Kandahar province, the historic birthplace of the Taliban. During the first year of this campaign,

Colvin alleges that up to 90 percent of the Afghans detained by the CAF disappeared from official monitoring. He estimates that Canada secretly transferred as many as 1,200 detainees to the US and NATO-backed Afghan puppet regime, which was widely known for its use of torture as "standard operating procedure."

Prisoners of the Karzai regime were subject to horrific abuse—from regular beatings, electric shocks, sleep deprivation, and sexual assault, up to extra-judicial murder. Knowledge of these practices was widespread by the time the CAF began its mission in Kandahar, acknowledged in reports by the UN, the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), and even admitted by the US State Department.

Colvin alleges that this massive program of secret detainee transfers to Afghan security forces amounted to international war crimes under the Geneva Conventions and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. "The willful transfer of prisoners to a significant risk of abuse, torture or murder is *prima facie* a grave war crime," he stated. "So, too, is their enforced disappearance."

"Persons Under Control" rather than war-prisoners

In a tactic borrowed from the US military's brutal counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, the CAF labelled the overwhelming majority of the people it detained in Kandahar as "Persons Under Control" or "PUCs," rather than prisoners, in order to circumvent the Geneva conventions on the treatment of prisoners of war.

Under the terms of a 2005 agreement between the Karzai regime and Canadian military officials, Canada was to notify the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) whenever Canadian soldiers transferred a prisoner to Afghan forces. This agreement, however, gave Canada no right of access to detainees in Afghan custody. Though the ICRC inspected Afghan prisons, it reported its findings only to the Karzai regime itself – it was prohibited by its own charter and by decades of practice from divulging its assessments to third parties.

Nevertheless, Canada's military sought to evade even this level of scrutiny of its handling of detainees. Of the up to 1,200 people that Colvin estimates were detained from spring 2006 to 2007, the CAF only ever notified the ICRC of 129 official prisoners. Instead, it classified up to 90 percent of the people it detained as PUCs to avoid informing the ICRC that they had been disappeared into the prisons and interrogation rooms of the Afghan secret police.

Colvin described this as an "unauthorized and undeclared policy" that was conducted on a "massive scale." He noted that the number of Canadian detainees was about 45 times the number of people detained by British forces in southern Afghanistan, even though the British military force was larger. This massive influx of detainees was the product of the

brutal counter-insurgency tactics the CAF deployed in Kandahar, as it terrorized the civilian population to assert control of the province and suppress a growing Taliban insurgency.

Colvin described an incident that took place on May 17, 2006, when Canadian soldiers surrounded an Afghan village in a “cordon-and-search” operation. The CAF detained and transferred at least 62 people to Afghan custody that day, a total based on the report of a subsequent Board of Inquiry and the memoirs of former military officers. All of the detainees were classified as PUCs. “The official Canadian detainee count for that day was zero,” he noted.

Once captured, detainees were transferred so quickly that the Canadian military never knew who they were, or if they were even connected to the insurgency. As Colvin told a parliamentary committee in 2009, “Some of these Afghans may have been [Taliban] foot soldiers or day fighters. But 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.”

“In other words,” Colvin continued, “we detained, and handed over for severe torture, a lot of innocent people.”

While the military controlled the flow of detainees to the Karzai regime, Canadian civilian officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs (as it was then known) actively covered up these war crimes. When Colvin, who was a senior diplomat in Kandahar in 2006 and at the Canadian embassy in Kabul in 2007, brought reports of detainee torture to the attention of his superiors, he was rebuffed. Senior officials in the Department of Foreign Affairs openly discouraged diplomats in Afghanistan from reporting on the CAF treatment of detainees—those who maintained this policy of silence were promoted to the highest ranks, while diplomats who didn’t “toe the line” were punished, denied promotions, and threatened with prosecution by federal lawyers.

During the entirety of the Canadian deployment in Kandahar, the CAF never officially notified civilian authorities of the hundreds of PUCs it transferred to Afghan custody – the senior diplomats of the Harper government were eager to look the other way.

Revelations of torture spark political crisis, Harper shuts down Parliament

In early 2007, revelations of the horrifying treatment of detainees at the hands of the Afghan government—initially discovered in internal documents from Canada’s military police on the fate of 3 detainees, later reinforced by the accounts of other detainees in the press—shocked the public and set off a political crisis that ultimately led the Conservative minority government of Stephen Harper to shut down Parliament.

Following a complaint by the BC Civil Liberties Association and Amnesty International, Parliament launched an investigation into the treatment of CAF detainees under the Military Police Complaints Commission (MPCC). The Harper Conservatives responded with a blistering campaign of lies, obstruction, and intimidation directed at anyone who dared question the actions of the military.

Initially, the Conservative Defence Minister Gordon O’Connor—a former brigadier-general and 30-year veteran of the CAF—responded to the allegations of detainee torture with blatant lies. He claimed in Parliament that “The Red Cross or the Red Crescent is responsible to supervise their treatment once the prisoners are in the hands of the Afghan authorities. If there is something wrong with their treatment, the Red Cross or Red Crescent would inform us and we would take action.”

This claim was patently false and, in the light of Colvin’s revelations of

how the CAF sought to avoid ICRC scrutiny, utterly disingenuous. Officials from the ICRC directly contradicted O’Connor, emphasizing that it was not responsible for monitoring the transfer agreement between the CAF and the Karzai regime, and was prohibited from revealing to Canada any results of its investigation of the Afghan prisons.

Despite the fact that Colvin had sent more than a dozen reports on the treatment of detainees to top CAF officials, his superiors at the Department of Foreign Affairs, and the Prime Minister’s Office—as well as the widespread reports on conditions in Afghan prisons from the UN, the Afghan Human Rights Commission, and the US State Department—the Harper government incredibly claimed that it had no reason to believe that Afghan authorities were abusing detainees before accounts of their torture appeared in the press.

In tandem with its blatant lies to the public, the Harper government launched a legal campaign to suppress any public investigation of the Canadian military’s war crimes. It sought an injunction to shut down the MPCC investigation into the treatment of detainees, and when that effort failed, the Conservatives did all they could to obstruct its work. They sent threatening letters to witnesses set to appear before the MPCC and moved to prevent witnesses, including Colvin, from appearing on the grounds that their testimony would violate the national security provisions of the 2001 Anti-Terrorism Act. The government refused to provide the MPCC with the documents it requested in its investigation; the few documents it did hand over were heavily redacted, often with entire pages blacked out.

When Colvin was prevented from testifying before the MPCC, Opposition MPs voted to invite him to testify before a Parliamentary Committee in the fall of 2009, thereby providing him with immunity from the prosecution under the Anti-Terrorism Act. The Liberals and the New Democratic Party called at the time for a public inquiry into the transfer of CAF detainees to be tortured—not as opponents of the crimes of Canadian imperialism, but as a means of embarrassing the Conservatives and preserving the myth of the CAF as “peacekeepers” and protectors of “human rights.”

The Harper government went to extraordinary lengths to obstruct the work of this Parliamentary committee: it refused to provide the Committee with documents pertaining to the Afghan detainee issue on national security grounds, and Conservative members boycotted the committee, depriving it of quorum. When the opposition passed a motion in Parliament instructing the government to provide the documents to the committee, the Harper government openly defied it.

All the while, the Conservatives slandered critics of the war crimes of the Canadian military as “pro-Taliban” stooges undermining the military and the war effort. In a bellicose speech given on a battleship, Harper told CAF soldiers: “Living as we do, in a time when some in the political arena do not hesitate before throwing the most serious of allegations at our men and women in uniform, based on the most flimsy of evidence, remember that Canadians from coast to coast to coast are proud of you and stand behind you, and I am proud of you, and I stand beside you.”

Rocked by the revelations of CAF complicity in torture and its own role in covering up these war crimes, and with anti-war sentiment spreading rapidly in the working class, the Harper government used its powers to suspend parliament in December 2009 and shut down the parliamentary committee investigating the abuses. This was the second time in little more than a year that Harper had prorogued parliament to stanch a political crisis. In late 2008, amid the global financial crisis, Harper had prevailed on the unelected Governor General to shut down parliament so as to prevent the opposition parties from defeating his minority government and replacing it with a Liberal-NDP coalition. Noting the unprecedented character of Harper’s actions, the *World Socialist Web Site* aptly characterized them at the time as a constitutional coup. As in 2008, the Harper government’s anti-democratic short-circuiting of Parliament in 2009 was met with overwhelming approval from Canada’s ruling elite.

Ultimately, the opposition worked to avert a political-constitutional crisis and joined in the effort to cover up CAF war crimes by agreeing to a Conservative proposal that documents on Afghan detainee issue be studied by a tiny, specially-vetted committee of MPs who were sworn to secrecy. The Harper government withheld uncensored documents from this committee for months, before cynically dumping 40,000 pages of documents onto a 3-person review committee when threatened with charges of contempt of parliament. When the Conservatives won a majority government in the 2011 election, they unceremoniously shut the committee down.

Despite having postured as defenders of “human rights” and called for a public inquiry into the torture of Afghan detainees as members of the Opposition in 2009, the Liberals under Justin Trudeau adopted wholesale the position of the Harper government when they came to power in 2015. The next year, then Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan, who served as a CAF intelligence officer during its Afghan combat mission, responded to a petition to open a public inquiry into the issue by whitewashing the military’s criminal activities and bluntly rejecting an inquiry. “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,” claimed Sajjan.

The war in Afghanistan: Canadian imperialism sheds the “Peacekeeper” mask

The war crimes of the Canadian military in Afghanistan, and the complicity of the government officials and politicians who enabled and whitewashed these crimes, were a direct consequence of the imperialist and neocolonial nature of the war. The war in Afghanistan was the first in an endless series of wars unleashed by US imperialism in the Greater Middle East under the pretext of the “War on Terror” that devastated entire societies, killed millions, and drove tens of millions more from their homes as refugees. Through this eruption of imperialist violence, the US sought to establish through force its dominance of the resource-rich and geo-strategically critical region at the expense of its rivals in Iran, Russia, and China. Canada, alongside its NATO allies, integrated itself deeply into US-led wars and played a key role supporting US military operations.

The Canadian military’s role in the war in Afghanistan was a critical way in which the Canadian ruling class deepened its longstanding alliance with the US during this outburst of imperialist aggression. Between the start of the war in 2001 and the end of the final CAF mission in 2014, Canada sent over 40,000 soldiers to Afghanistan—eventually making it the largest Canadian military deployment since the Second World War. 158 CAF personnel were killed, and more than 100 subsequently committed suicide.

Ships from the Canadian navy supported the initial US invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, while Canadian Special Forces arrived on the ground later that year. CAF soldiers deployed to Kabul in 2003 as part of NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and Canadian Lieutenant-General Rick Hillier assumed command of the ISAF early 2004. In 2005, the Canadian intervention escalated dramatically, when Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin agreed to double the troop deployment to Afghanistan and have the CAF assume command of the counter-insurgency war in Kandahar province. This was part of a quid pro quo with Washington that freed up more US troops to fight in Iraq and was meant to publicly atone for the previous Liberal government’s decision to not join the 2003 invasion of Iraq—although, as George W. Bush’s Canadian emissary, Paul Cellucci, would later admit, Canada’s military

would do far more behind the scenes to support the US war in Iraq than most members of the “coalition of the willing.”

It was in Kandahar that the CAF engaged, over the course of five years, in their bloodiest fighting of the war. At its height, nearly 3,000 CAF members were deployed at any one time, fighting alongside Afghan forces in door-to-door raids and cordon-and-search operations. As part of the ISAF, the CAF worked closely with the occupation forces of the UK and Australia, who have likewise sought to deny and suppress evidence of the atrocities they committed in Afghanistan, including the torture and extra-judicial killing of civilians. The war crimes they committed in their attempts to suppress resistance to the corrupt, brutal puppets installed by US imperialism only further solidified popular hatred of the neo-colonial Kabul regime, which collapsed ignominiously in August 2021.

While Canada’s ruling elite used the military mission in Afghanistan to deepen its alliance with US imperialism – the principal means through which it could pursue its own imperialist interests – it used the war domestically to transform the image of the CAF, from “peacekeepers” to an aggressive interventionist force and to whip up a bellicose, explicitly militarist Canadian nationalism. While Canadian nationalists had long portrayed the military as a benevolent force, the ruling elite recognized that, in the words of Liberal Foreign Minister John Manley in 2001, “If you want to play a role in the world, there’s a cost to doing that.” General Rick Hillier was blunter still. “We’re not the public service of Canada,” he declared. “We are the Canadian Forces, and our job is to be able to kill people.”

The political and media establishment fully embraced the “War on Terror” rhetoric of US imperialism, justifying the invasion in Afghanistan as a response to 9/11 and claiming that it brought “women’s rights” and “freedom” to a country dominated by the “barbaric” Taliban. The state bolstered its repressive powers with a raft of anti-democratic legislation, like the 2001 Anti-Terrorism Act, and in the name of the “War on Terror” facilitated the torture of Canadian citizens like Maher Arar and Omar Khadr. Politicians and editorial writers slandered opponents of the war and Canadian militarism as “pro-Taliban” and “terrorist sympathizers.” When confronted with evidence of its complicity in the war crimes in Afghanistan, the Canadian political establishment defied all democratic norms to bury the issue.

In the decades since, the Canadian ruling elite has continued to pursue its imperialist ambitions as aggressively as possible, serving as a loyal junior partner to US imperialism as it has unleashed a global war on multiple fronts—from air strikes during the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya in 2011 and in Iraq and Syria during the Syrian Civil War in 2014-15, to the key role it continues to play in arming and supporting NATO’s Ukrainian proxies in the war against Russia.

As the second Trump administration escalates war in the Middle East, intensifying the genocide in Gaza, and stepping up plans for the US military to wage war on China, all sections of the Canadian elite have desperately sought to preserve their strategic alliance with Washington. While Colvin’s most recent revelations of Canadian war crimes in Afghanistan have been passed over in silence, all the parties of the political establishment—from the Conservatives and the Liberals to the pro-Quebec independence Bloc Québécois and the trade union-sponsored NDP—have committed to drastically increasing military spending by tens of billions of dollars. As it did in Afghanistan, Canadian imperialism wants to claim its seat at the table in the new imperialist redivision of the world—whatever the cost—by participating in World War Three. The only social force capable of halting this mad war policy is the Canadian and international working class, mobilized in struggle on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program to end imperialist war and the capitalist system that breeds it.



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