

UK inquiry told special forces had “deliberate policy” to “kill fighting-aged males” in Afghanistan

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According to material released at the Independent Inquiry relating to Afghanistan, a UK special forces unit had a “deliberate policy” to “kill fighting-aged males... even when they did not pose a threat” during the US-led imperialist occupation (2001-2021). Evidence proves there was a “conscious decision” made by the chain of command to cover it up.

The Inquiry, now in its third year, was established by the then Conservative government to investigate allegations of 80 unlawful killings by UK Special Forces in Afghanistan between 2010 and 2013. This was forced by a July 2022 broadcast of an episode of the BBC *Panorama* documentary series, *SAS Death Squads Exposed: A British War Crime?*

Chaired by Judge Charles Haddon-Cave, the inquiry’s hearing began in October 2023. It is specifically investigating alleged extra-judicial killings by the Special Air Service (SAS), the main special forces unit of the British Army. The inquiry opened after years of allegations of unlawful killings, and was pre-empted by a legal challenge made by bereaved family members and media outlets into the conduct of UK special forces (UKSF).

Documents were released by the inquiry last month after evidence was given in closed hearings by members of the UK special forces. These include a note from April 2011 in which a senior officer (codenamed N1466) warned the director of UK special forces about the “deliberate policy”, apparently sharing concerns from the unit’s commanding officer. N1466 said a “conscious decision” was made to cover up potential war crimes by the unit, which has been dubbed UKSF1 to conceal its identity.

It was “not just one director that has known about this”, N1466 said in his evidence, adding that the UK Special Forces leadership was “very much suppressing” the

allegations.

He confirmed to the inquiry that neither of the two former heads of special forces had passed any of the allegations on to the Royal Military Police (RMP) despite protocol requiring them to do so. The inquiry’s reporting restrictions mean these former directors cannot be named.

In the note, N1466—who was assistant chief of staff for operations in UKSF headquarters—described what he’d heard from the unit’s commanding officer: “He felt that this was... possibly a deliberate policy among the current (sub-unit) to engage and kill fighting-aged males on target even when they did not pose a threat.

“He had been approached by some of his men who recounted separate conversations with (trained) members of UKSF1 in which such suggestions had been made.”

The note explained that the unit’s commanding officer “is sure that they are accurately reporting what they are hearing from colleagues.”

To the suggestion that the allegations were simply a “rumour” or a “wind up”, N1466 said “the context would not support either assertion.”

He added “Clearly, if there is anything more than rumour behind it then elements of UKSF have strayed into indefensible ethical and legal behaviour ... My instinct is that this merits deeper investigation.”

N1466 claimed that the director, known to the inquiry as N1802, made a “conscious decision” to cover up potential war crimes. He further accused N1802 of controlling information about alleged killings “in a way that I think indicated a desire to keep it low profile.”

The director apparently shared his view about the allegations, N1466 believed, stating that he [the director] chose to handle the information in a “way which limited the spread of the damage outside the headquarters.”

N1802 initiated a review of the tactics, techniques and

procedures (TTPs) used by the sub-unit in question in April 2011. But in his witness statement, N1466 recalled feeling that the TTP review was intended simply as a “warning shot across the bows” of the unit, and that “it was obvious that it was a charade.”

Testimony from N1466 continued, “I was sure at the time and I remain sure that N1802 knew what was happening on the ground. The speed of N1802’s response and the absence of any further mention or investigation of unlawful activity only fortified my belief that he was aware of what was going on.”

Among the documents released by the inquiry was a summary of an interview between N1466 and the Royal Military Police (RMP) in October 2018.

During the exchange, the officer described an incident where members of UKSF1 went to clear a compound and found a room where some Afghans were hiding under a mosquito net.

N1466 stated, “They did not reveal themselves, so the UKSF1 shot at the net until there was no movement. When the net was uncovered it was women and children.

“The incident was covered up and the individual who did the shooting was allegedly given some form of award to make it look legitimate.”

“I will be clear, we are talking about war crimes,” he said.

Testimony by N1466 also referred to an alleged August 2012 SAS night-raid killing of Afghan couple Hussain Uzbekzai and Ruqquia Haleem, and the severe injuries caused to their two children Imran and Bilal—while they slept in the village of Shesh Aba, in Nimruz province.

He added, “Even if you subscribe to some sort of idea that most of the people who were killed were Taliban fighters, which I do not... Imran and Bilal, at one-and-a-half and three, certainly were not.”

N1466 said his suspicions began with a night raid in which nine Afghan men were killed and just three weapons were claimed to have been discovered. BBC *Panorama* visited the scene of that raid and found bullet holes inside the room where the men died clustered close to the ground.

Weapons experts told the BBC that the pattern suggested the victims had been shot while they were lying down, and that the firefight described by the SAS in their report was unlikely. The family of the men said they were civilians and had no weapons.

N1466 is the highest-ranking former special forces officer to provide evidence of war crimes. He was the assistant chief of staff for operations in UKSF

headquarters.

In 2023, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the RMP, which is accused of failing to investigate the allegations of unlawful killings, sought sweeping restrictions over material submitted to the inquiry, citing national security and privacy.

The application for restrictive orders was challenged by Sky News and a number of other media outlets, as well as the victims’ families. Commenting December 1 on the evidence provided by N1466, the broadcaster stated, “So, we almost didn’t get to see the files released today.”

It noted, “Even though there are few details and much of it is redacted, N1466’s testimony adds to growing allegations that British soldiers committed war crimes in Afghanistan and that officers and personnel at the MoD failed to adequately investigate the claims.”

In 2021, Boris Johnson’s Tory government enacted the Overseas Operations Act (OOA) which provides the Armed Forces with increased protection against legal scrutiny on overseas activities. The legislation also introduced a “presumption against prosecution” for criminal offences five years after an alleged incident and a time limit on civil claims for torture and murder. Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour Party refused to oppose the bill, penalising MPs who voted against. Now in government, Labour has kept the legislation on the books.

While providing more evidence for what is already widely known—that UK forces were involved in a brutal military occupation which saw the murder of many civilians—the current and previous inquiries provide no justice for these crimes.

Operation Northmoor was opened in 2014 to examine allegations of over 600 offences by British forces in Afghanistan, as well as executions by special forces, including of children. The investigation was terminated in 2019, and resulted in no prosecutions.

An investigation by the RMP, Operation Cestro, resulted in just three soldiers being referred to the Service Prosecuting Authority. None were prosecuted.



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