Photographs from UK inquiry appear to show Afghans shot in their beds during SAS raids

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The Independent Inquiry relating to Afghanistan (IIA) in London released photographs from two 2011 raids by the UK's Special Air Service (SAS) in Helmand province that appear to show unarmed Afghans shot dead in their beds. The inquiry's lead barrister said they may be evidence of war crimes.

Releasing the photographs on November 10, Oliver Glasgow KC (King's Counsel) told the inquiry that many of the dead appear to have sustained head shots and that in a number of cases a body lies with its head on a pillow. The BBC described one photograph of a person tucked under a floral blanket, with blood spatter low on a wall, consistent with someone being shot while lying down. Further analysis, Glasgow said, may confirm whether they were "shot when asleep." The photographs are under forensic examination.

Glasgow noted that they appear to contradict the SAS's operational accounts and would have raised serious questions for military police officers who investigated the raids as possible murders. Of the 17 Afghans killed in the two operations, the youngest were 14 and 15.

As the WSWS reported, the raids under examination include one on February 7, 2011, in which nine men died in their beds in northern Helmand, and one on February 9, 2011, in which eight Afghans were killed in a guesthouse—17 deaths in all, the number the BBC gave for the two photographed operations. Families said the men killed on February 7 were most likely shot while asleep; the SAS claimed it fired in self-defence.

The photographs bear out what BBC *Panorama* has reported in more than eight years of investigating SAS killings of unarmed civilians and children. Weapons experts told the BBC that multiple rounds appeared to have been fired from above, indicating victims lying down or sitting against a wall rather than in a firefight. Relatives said those killed were shot cleanly in the head or chest.

Official SAS accounts claim Taliban insurgents fired first. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) says *Panorama* jumped to unjustified conclusions and that two service police investigations found insufficient evidence to prosecute.

Panorama's July 2022 revelations that forced the inquiry. The then Conservative government first denounced the programme, before announcing a fresh investigation within 24 hours. The inquiry is examining allegations that 80 or more unarmed Afghans were unlawfully killed between 2010 and 2013 and that evidence was destroyed.

Testimony it released on January 8, 2025, described an unofficial policy to "kill all males on target," and a victim smothered with a pillow before being shot. On December 9, 2025, the WSWS reported further material describing a "deliberate policy" to "kill fighting-aged males" and a conscious decision by the chain of command to cover it up.

Lieutenant Colonel John Harvey, who led the military police murder probe, admitted depriving a war crimes investigation of potentially valuable information. Harvey was Gold Commander of Operation Northmoor from 2016 to 2019. Operation Northmoor, launched by the Royal Military Police in 2014, examined more than 600 alleged offences by British forces, including the alleged killing of children by the SAS.

Harvey told the inquiry the photographs "didn't look right" and agreed that their examination might have produced evidence clearing special forces of wrongdoing. Agreeing with a suggestion from Glasgow, Harvey said that the only reason people would not want photographs to be examined was that "they don't want the answers to come out."

Despite repeated requests from police investigators, the photographs were never submitted for further testing. One investigator, speaking anonymously, told the BBC that bullet marks so low on the walls appeared to undermine the special forces' version of events.

Operation Northmoor began winding down in 2017 and was terminated in 2019. Investigators were still gathering evidence in Afghanistan in July 2019, the inquiry heard, as senior officers prepared to close the murder investigations and inform ministers. A member of an Afghan special-forces unit that operated alongside British special forces told military police he had seen a British soldier plant a rifle on

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an unarmed person after they had been killed.

Witnesses have been kept out of reach or have refused to speak. As the WSWS noted, the inquiry can compel witnesses living in Britain but not Afghans abroad. British special forces then used a veto to block all 2,022 resettlement applications that came from Afghan commando units that had served alongside them, which kept potential witnesses out of the inquiry's reach.

Inquiry chair Lord Justice Charles Haddon-Cave said in October 2023 that a "high proportion" of the SAS personnel approached had invoked the privilege against self-incrimination and refused to answer any questions. He also revealed that the inquiry had obtained about 10,000 high-resolution photographs from the raids that did not appear to have formed part of the military police inquiries.

That same day, a letter from MoD lawyers disclosed that the ministry had "discovered" 97 million documents, more than three years into the proceedings. Haddon-Cave called the late appearance of the material "troubling." At a hearing on September 25, MoD lawyers apologised and the ministry called it a "regrettable failure." Lawyers for the bereaved families called it staggering.

The MoD says it has identified thousands of potentially relevant documents, including images that appear to have been taken during operations under investigation. More files are due on November 20.

The inquiry promised an interim report within 18 months but has yet to publish any findings. It has cost £58 million, according to the BBC, and around half of that is understood to have been spent by the MoD and wider government in responding to it, including on lawyers for former SAS officers and senior military figures. On November 12, Haddon-Cave said his April 30, 2027 deadline for hearing all evidence "must be kept."

The US-led invasion and occupation of Afghanistan (2001–2021) was a dirty colonial war in which the British ruling class played its bloody role. It was waged in large part under a Labour government, and a new one is helping to lead the coverup.

Defence Secretary Wes Streeting—speaking on Remembrance Sunday at the Cenotaph ceremony attended by Prime Minister Andy Burnham and former prime minister and unindicted war criminal Tony Blair—said special forces "live under a cloud" of fear of being persecuted rather than thanked, adding: "Those are things I need to put right."

Conservative Party leader Kemi Badenoch said the treatment of the SAS would be "Labour's legacy" unless Burnham ended "this nonsense." A Conservative spokesman declared that any future Conservative government would leave the European Convention on Human Rights "to stop our troops being subjected to vexatious law suits."

Reform UK's armed forces spokesman Angus MacIntyre called for an end to prosecutions of special forces personnel, pledging to halt all current and future prosecutions of troops who served in Northern Ireland.

The *Telegraph* declared: "The fearsome reputation of the SAS is being blunted … Witch hunts driven by politicians, lawyers and Left-wing activists posing as journalists will only harm our forces." The *Mail* has been waging a concerted effort to cast IIA investigators as the dupes of Moscow and Beijing.

Serving SAS officers are escalating the pushback. On November 13, the *Telegraph* reported a letter from Brigadier Ed Butler, president of the SAS Regimental Association, to 5,000 serving and retired members. The letter accused the BBC of having "wholly misrepresented" the unit. According to the newspaper, it said the BBC had used footage of Australian SAS operations, potentially giving viewers the impression they were watching British troops. The letter also warned that hostile states would exploit the inquiry to spread "misinformation, disinformation and distortion."

An official Australian inquiry found in November 2020 credible evidence that its special forces murdered 39 Afghan civilians and prisoners, and in April former soldier Ben Roberts-Smith was charged with war crimes. He awaits trial.

Whatever the British inquiry's eventual findings, four years in it has produced none, and it is overseen, funded and obstructed by the same state apparatus whose conduct it is meant to examine. The closing of ranks by Labour, the Conservatives, Reform UK and the military brass shows that justice for the Afghan victims will not come from the capitalist state. It requires the independent mobilisation of the working class against imperialism and militarism.



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