

More questions about whom Australian troops are killing in Afghanistan

By Peter Symonds
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Australian special forces soldiers have been involved in another armed clash in eastern Afghanistan. Ten people are reported to have been killed and once again serious questions have been raised about who the casualties were. Coalition spokesmen claim those killed were hostile enemy in “a known Al Qaeda area” but a number of media reports citing Afghan sources challenge the official story.

The incident occurred north of Khost towards the border with Pakistan on May 16. According to the British military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Ben Curry, two Australian SAS teams were fired upon from several positions and “harried” for four to five hours. US AC-130 and helicopter gunships were called in and killed at least nine of the “enemy”. Another was killed by the Australian troops. No bodies were recovered and no evidence has been released to demonstrate that the dead were Al Qaeda or Taliban fighters.

Soon after the clash, however, a number of Afghan officials loyal to the US-backed Karzai administration in Kabul insisted that the Australian troops had blundered into the middle of a dispute between warring tribesmen. Taj Mohammad Wardak, governor of neighbouring Gardez province, told Reuters: “There was fighting between two tribes and they probably fired at the Australian soldiers, and then the helicopters came.”

On May 18, a delegation from the Sabri tribe met with US officers at Khost airport to demand an explanation for the bombing that killed nine of their fellow tribesmen and wounded three others. According to Mir Walijan, an aide to the Khost governor, Sabri elders had radioed the governor during the bombing for help. They denied firing towards the US aircraft or having links to Al Qaeda or the Taliban leadership.

Their calls for an explanation were met with bald denials from coalition spokesmen. US Major Bryan Hilferty declared: “I have no reason to believe that. They were shooting heavy machine guns and mortars at us. That is a known Al Qaeda and Taliban area.” His Australian counterpart in Canberra, Lieutenant Colonel David Tyler, parroted a similar line: “I can only say that we reacted with the rules of engagement and did what was required when we came under heavy and sustained fire in a known Al Qaeda stronghold.”

No evidence, no explanation. In fact, on the day after the clash, when 1,000 coalition troops went to scour the area they found nothing to indicate that the area had been a stronghold for Al Qaeda, Taliban or anyone else. Major Richard King, in charge of a British marine company, explained: “Our troops have found caves, but there is nothing to suggest that there was any enemy stronghold here or any recent enemy activity.” One man was detained and flown to Bagram but there is no suggestion that he is connected to any terrorist network.

Further evidence that Australian and US troops had killed Afghan tribesmen was contained in a detailed account based on reports from Khost and published in the *Christian Science Monitor* on May 20. It described the events as follows:

“The trouble started at 4.30 pm on Thursday, when two US helicopters appeared, just as members of the Sabri and Mangal tribes were exchanging gun fire from their positions on the mountain. Both tribes say they had seen US helicopters in the area before, and assumed it was a routine patrol. Neither tribe realised that the helicopters were providing air support for a patrol of Australian special forces.

“The Australians and the helicopters fled the area, but when the Australian patrol continued to take fire from the mountaintop, they called in air support. At 10 pm, three US AC-130 gunships and two US helicopters arrived and fired rockets on the Sabri positions, killing 10 of the Sabri men, most of them teenagers. Two other Sabris and one Mangal tribe member were injured seriously, and a half dozen others are still missing.”

As the article explained, the tribal rivalry, which has raged sporadically for 60 years, is well known in the area. It centres on the contested ownership of a mountain and its stand of timber—a scarce and lucrative resource in Afghanistan. The Sabris won control of the disputed area in the early 1990s under an agreement mediated by the Mujaheddin government. The Mangal tribe took the mountain back under the Taliban, and now the Sabris are reclaiming the area.

Sabri leaders came to Khost to ask Governor Abdel Hakim Taniwal to intervene with the US on their behalf. Tribal elder Haji Mohammed Hanif said he could not understand why his men had been fired on even after his tribe had informed US special forces in Khost that they had armed men stationed on

the mountain, and had provided maps of their positions.

“We are very disappointed, very unhappy. We don’t know why US forces are killing us,” Hanif said. “After the attack, we took the US ground troops up to the mountain and showed them the direction of our guns, to prove that it was not us who fired on the helicopter.” Sabris accuse the Mangals of firing on coalition forces to provoke a confrontation, and vice versa. “For a small village like ours, the loss of 10 men is a big thing. We don’t blame anybody, but if they do that to us again, it will be difficult for us to defend our territory,” Hanif added.

Despite growing evidence to the contrary, Australian military spokesmen have been dismissive of claims that those killed were Afghan tribesmen. No formal investigation has been announced, no apologies have been made to the families of the dead and no one is likely to be held accountable. The incident has been all but buried in the Australian press.

In response to a question at a press conference in Canberra on May 18, Brigadier Mike Hannon blandly declared: “As I said to you, the Australians were where they were supposed to be, doing exactly what they were supposed to be doing and doing it well. This particular battle went on for a substantial period of time and I can assure you that the firing was directed at the Australians and not at each other.”

Asked a series of questions about the encounter, he refused to provide any details—place, numbers of “enemy fighters”, the number killed or who they were. At a further briefing a few days later on May 21, Lieutenant Colonel David Tyler stonewalled again. Asked if the clash had been with “some tribal minority”, Tyler simply repeated that the SAS had come “under heavy and sustained fire in a known Al Qaeda stronghold”.

When asked what evidence the military had to point to the identity of the “enemy,” Tyler stated: “I don’t have information on that. That’s part of the process which is being undertaken now. All of that battle assessment is being made and we’ll be in a position I hope later on to give you some more information.” However, no further detail has been forthcoming.

The comments are more revealing than perhaps the Australian military would like. The SAS along with the US and other troops are engaged in wide-ranging patrols throughout southeastern Afghanistan. To declare that the SAS troops were “where they were supposed to be, doing exactly what they were supposed to be doing” is the height of arrogance.

Seven months of bombing and raids as part of the US invasion of Afghanistan have resulted in growing hostility and anger among the Pashtun tribesmen in these areas. Widely viewed as intruders if not invaders, the soldiers blundered into the middle of a tribal dispute. Whoever fired the first shots, and that remains to be established, the Australian troops were able to call in overwhelming air support and more than 1,000 heavily armed coalition soldiers.

As a result, at least 10 people are dead. Allegations that the

soldiers killed local tribesmen are dismissed with the answer that the area was a “known Al Qaeda stronghold”. Any further questions about detail or evidence have been met with a mixture of silence and contemptuous indifference. Any dead are simply branded as Al Qaeda or Taliban. In doing so the military are able to rely on a largely servile media. With few exceptions, no further questions are asked, and so no answers are given.

The latest clash is part of a pattern. An earlier WSWs article reported on the killing of two people by SAS troops on April 29. Brigadier Mike Hannon insisted in several press conferences that those who had been shot were Al Qaeda and Taliban. Then an article appeared in the London-based *Times* newspaper by Anthony Loyd, a former British soldier and experienced defence correspondent, who stated on the basis of a special services source that the account was false. The dead men were Afghans who had “stumbled across” the SAS surveillance team.

In following up the story, the WSWs questioned an Australian Defence Department spokeswoman over the *Times* article. She insisted that the military stood by its original account and all but called Lloyd a liar. Closer questioning, however, produced the following exchange:

WSWS: Do you have any evidence that the people that were either killed or wounded were so-called Al Qaeda or Taliban?

SW: Well we have people on the ground who are specially trained to make these assessments and that’s their assessment.

WSWS: But do you have any evidence?

SW: That I can’t say, I don’t know.

In response to further questions, the spokeswoman simply repeated that the Defence Department stuck to its story. “If I find out anything to the contrary I will certainly give you a call back,” she declared. No return call was received.

So the question remains: who are coalition troops killing in Afghanistan? The mounting evidence points to an ongoing campaign of intimidation and repression directed against opposition to the presence of US and other foreign troops, particularly in the south and east of the country.

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