

US soldiers killed Afghan civilians and kept fingers, skull as trophies

By Patrick Martin
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American soldiers murdered Afghan civilians for sport and kept finger bones, leg bones, a tooth and a skull as grisly trophies, according to documents released by the Pentagon on Wednesday. The case is the worst such atrocity yet revealed in Afghanistan. It underscores that just as in Iraq, the US military intervention is a brutal colonial war in which the entire population of the country is a target.

The official charge sheets released by the US Army greatly expand the case initially brought against five soldiers charged in June with premeditated murder and beating a fellow soldier who was threatening to inform on them. A total of 12 soldiers now face 76 charges, with multiple counts of drug abuse, mutilating corpses, filing false reports, lying to military investigators and acts of violence against fellow soldiers. (See “The twelve soldiers charged in atrocity and cover-up”)

All 12 soldiers are from the same company of the 5th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, based at Joint Base Lewis-McChord near Tacoma, Washington. The brigade recently returned from a year-long deployment near Kandahar in southern Afghanistan.

Six of the soldiers face charges of keeping body parts from Afghan corpses, while three are charged with taking or possessing photographs in which US soldiers posed with the bodies of their victims. One is charged with stabbing a corpse.

The highest-ranking soldier in the group, Staff Sgt. Calvin R. Gibbs, is allegedly the instigator of the atrocities, and faces a total of 16 charges. According to the official documents, after the brigade was deployed to Afghanistan last year, Gibbs began to boast of conducting similar actions with impunity during a previous deployment in Iraq. He egged on fellow soldiers to take part, telling them how easy it was to “toss a grenade at someone and kill them.”

Gibbs helped organize a “kill team” that targeted Afghan civilians randomly and then cut off the fingers of their victims as trophies. This grisly celebration of murder was widely practiced during the Vietnam War, and the tradition has apparently been handed down to the current generation of American “warriors.”

Gibbs is charged with possessing “finger bones, leg bones, and a tooth from Afghan corpses.” He is also accused of showing the severed fingers of one Afghan victim to another soldier as a way of intimidating him and covering up the crimes. According to the charge sheet, Gibbs participated in the May 5 beating of a fellow soldier and threatened “to kill him if he spoke about hashish use within the platoon.”

The three murders were committed during a four-month period earlier this year.

- On January 15, Gul Mudin was killed “by means of throwing a fragmentary grenade at him and shooting him with a rifle,” an action carried out by Spc. Jeremy Morlock and Pfc. Andrew Holmes under the direction of Gibbs. Morlock allegedly told Holmes, 19 and on his first tour of duty, that the killing was carried out for fun.

- On February 22, Gibbs and Spc. Michael S. Wagnon allegedly shot the second victim, Marach Agha, and placed a Kalashnikov next to the body to justify the killing.

- On May 2, Mullah Adadhdad was killed after being shot and attacked with a grenade. Spc. Adam C. Winfield and Gibbs were allegedly the perpetrators.

The military investigation was not triggered by any of the murders of Afghans, but rather by an incident May 5, when seven of the charged soldiers allegedly beat up at least one fellow soldier in an effort to keep him quiet. This soldier had initially complained to commanders about extensive illegal drug use, primarily

smoking of hashish. After the beating, he also began talking about the murders, which were an open secret in the company.

The seven soldiers whose names were made public for the first time yesterday, are charged with participating in the beating and other efforts to cover up drug abuse and other offenses. But the Army is reportedly investigating other possible criminal actions against Afghan civilians, including a shooting involving six of the soldiers in March.

Staff Sgt. Robert Stevens is charged with lying to investigators about that shooting, telling them that the Afghans were a threat to the troops, and that one had been in possession of a rocket-propelled grenade, when he knew this claim was false.

The actual prosecution of the 12 soldiers promises to be a protracted and uncertain affair. Army officials told the press that the case is largely based on extensive statements given by one of the five charged with murder, Spc. Jeremy Morlock. His attorney says Morlock suffered traumatic brain injuries from IEDs in Afghanistan and was being treated with anti-depressants, muscle relaxers and sleep medication, while also using hashish and opium. Such comments are an invitation to a legal challenge to the credibility of Morlock's testimony.

As with previous investigations into military atrocities in Iraq and Afghanistan, the focus of the official investigation is entirely on the low-level perpetrators of particular war crimes, and not on the commanders in the field or their civilian superiors in Washington, whose policies are ultimately responsible for the violence.

This latest atrocity explodes the official pretense of the Obama administration that the war in Afghanistan is aimed at "fighting terrorism" and liberating the Afghan population from Taliban misrule.

It is the hallmark of colonial wars, waged for predatory purposes by imperialist powers against poor and backward countries, that the soldiers are systematically brutalized by the role they are assigned to play.

Given that the inhabitants of the targeted country naturally resent and oppose invasion and occupation, and that the insurgent forces fighting the occupation blend in with the local population, it is inevitable that the soldiers of the invading power will come to look on

the people as a whole as the enemy.

This pattern has emerged over and over, whether with French troops in Algeria, British troops in Northern Ireland, or American troops in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Those soldiers involved in criminal acts of violence against innocent civilians should be tried and punished. But far more important is the prosecution of those whose political and military decisions made such atrocities inevitable.

The top officials of the Obama and Bush administrations, and their counterparts in the major NATO powers participating in the occupation of Afghanistan, must be brought to judgment before an international tribunal.

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