

US officials seek to contain fallout from hospital massacre in Afghanistan

By Thomas Gaist
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Four days after US forces slaughtered at least 22 civilians, including three doctors and nine other medical staff with Doctors without Borders (Medecins Sans Frontieres—MSF), the international charity has branded the action a war crime and called for an independent international inquiry into the airstrike that destroyed the MSF trauma hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan.

In an effort to forestall the growing international outcry, the White House has been compelled to issue an official statement of regret, including a phone call Wednesday by President Obama to MSF President Joanne Liu. During the phone call, Obama did not offer any explanation for the incident during his conversation with Liu, but did extend “his heartfelt apology,” according to White House spokesperson Josh Earnest.

Obama remains convinced that the attack was “a terrible, tragic accident,” that the US forces had “mistakenly struck an MSF field hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan,” and that no evidence has emerged to dispute this claim, Earnest said.

The cynical geopolitical calculations behind Obama’s pretense of sorry were underscored by the call placed later the same day by Obama to Afghan President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani. According to the White House press readout, Obama’s discussion with Ghani centered on the US plans for continued military and political intervention in Afghanistan.

“President Obama spoke today by phone with President Ashraf Ghani of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to commend the bravery of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces and to underscore that he looked forward to continuing to work closely with President Ghani and the broader Afghan Government to support their efforts to provide security for the Afghan people,” the White House press release said.

“President Obama and President Ghani reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening the partnership between the United States and Afghanistan,” the White House wrote.

In reality, Washington’s “efforts to provide security for the Afghan people,” and the associated “partnership”

between the US and its neocolonial client regime in Kabul, are the causes of the latest slaughter in Kunduz. The only beneficiary of the “security” which the US occupation forces are seeking to provide is the hated puppet government in Kabul. Fourteen years of US occupation have seen American forces perpetrate countless war crimes against the population of Afghanistan, as part of continuous counterinsurgency operations aimed propping up the Kabul regime.

Following the lead of the White House, the US Defense Department has similarly shifted its tone, clearly wary that the attack in Kunduz is producing a greater level of blowback than expected. With its military interventions in Syria, Iraq and Libya in shambles, the US ruling class is clearly concerned about a similar scenario in Afghanistan.

Initial Pentagon statements refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing or even to confirm that US forces were responsible for the incident. Speaking in Rome on Wednesday, however, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter also adopted more conciliatory rhetoric, saying that the US military would launch an inquiry to “hold accountable anyone responsible for conduct that was improper.”

Despite the equivocations of US and Afghan officials, the basic contours of the incident are now well established. A US AC-130 gunship, carrying out orders from US officers, repeatedly blasted the large hospital compound with heavy weapons over a period of nearly an hour and half. The main hospital facility was left completely burned out by the barrage, with witnesses describing hellish scenes of charred corpses burning atop the few remaining hospital beds.

“Our patients burned in their beds, MSF doctors, nurses, and other staff were killed as they worked. Our colleagues had to operate on each other,” MSF President Liu said.

“We had eight ICU (intensive care unit) beds with ventilators, this was high-tech medicine. This was not the little bush hospital. You could not miss it,” Liu said. “If we don’t safeguard that medical space for us to do our activities, then it is impossible to work in other contexts like Syria, South Sudan, like Yemen.”

Indeed, as Liu's comments imply, there is every reason to believe that the MSF hospital was targeted by the US military to send a message to foreign organizations operating in US war zones worldwide. The US-led occupation authorities had known about the large medical facility for years, and MSF personnel had contacted US military officials as recently as September 29 to reconfirm the precise location of the hospital.

Finally, days after the attack, US Army General John Campbell has confirmed that the strikes were carried out under direct orders from US officers, as part of military operations in Kunduz being led by US Special Forces teams.

Requests for aerial bombardment against the hospital "had to go through rigorous, US procedure to enable fires to go on the ground," Campbell said, during testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee. "We had a special operations unit in close vicinity that was talking to the aircraft that delivered those fires," Campbell said.

As MSF President Liu correctly noted in response to Campbell's remarks, these statements constitute "an admission of a war crime." Citing "inconsistencies" between the versions of events put forth by Washington and Kabul, MSF has called for the formation of a Geneva Convention-based independent investigatory committee to examine the details surrounding the attack.

US and Afghan officials had sought to deflect blame and obscure the basic facts during the days following the attack. The US military initially tried to palm off responsibility for the attacks on the Afghan military, while modifying its own version of events on each successive day.

On Sunday, the Afghan defense ministry began claiming that Taliban fighters were using the hospital as a "human shield" at the time of the strikes, and that the Afghan national forces accordingly requested US air support against the compound.

Speaking on behalf of the State Department, US Admiral John Kirby waved aside Liu's calls for an independent investigation. "The precedent for this kind of investigation into this kind of incident is well set and well established, certainly, over the last 14 years of war. The Defense Department is eminently capable of investigating mishaps and accidents and has done a superb job over the last decade or more doing that," Kirby said.

Whatever apologies Obama and the US military chiefs may now be mustering in public, privately they fully understand that such incidents are carried out deliberately as part of US policy and will continue to increase as the US embarks on stepped-up military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and countless other countries around the globe.

Far from an aberration, the savagery carried out by US forces in Kunduz this weekend is one among countless

atrocities carried out by American forces during the 14-year long US occupation of Afghanistan. Even bloodier events have been swept under the rug by the US media. Just weeks after the US invasion was launched, in November of 2001, US and British special forces oversaw the protracted massacre of hundreds of Taliban POWs, during an assault on the Qala-i-Janghi prison fort near Mazar-i-Sharif, an incident now referred to as the Battle of Qala-i-Jangi.

Over an agonizing six to seven days, the Western ground troops coordinated bombings and attacks by militias affiliated with the Northern Alliance, orchestrating a completely one-sided onslaught against the POWs, supposedly in response to an "uprising" among the prisoners, left as many as 700 dead.

The POWs had been captured in Kunduz before being driven into the prison fortress at Qala-Janghi. Fighting broke out inside the prison after a team of CIA paramilitary operatives began questioning prisoners, as Northern Alliance fighters bound their hands. The CIA personnel called for reinforcement by US and British commandos, who orchestrated the mass killing of the vast majority of the prisoners during the following week.

The *World Socialist Web Site* denounced the massacre at the time, calling for criminal prosecution of the US military and political officials involved.

"The massacre was a direct consequence of the decisions of leading US policymakers in Afghanistan," the WSWS wrote. "This is a crime of immense proportions that will haunt the American ruling elite. At some point, leading figures in the military establishment and the Bush administration may very well go to jail for their role in the bloodbath at Qala-i-Janghi."

The WSWS has maintained from the outset that the US war in Afghanistan is a criminal and predatory war of aggression, for which leading officers of the Pentagon and of multiple US presidential administrations must be tried and punished. The latest massacre in Kunduz will occupy a prominent place in a future war crimes tribunal against the Obama administration and its collaborators in the US military-intelligence establishment.

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