

Leaked reports expose Australian war crimes in Afghanistan

By Mike Head
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The government-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) this week published reports of leaked documents providing further evidence of crimes committed by Australian Special Forces in Afghanistan, while depicting them as simply the acts of individual soldiers.

Most of the documents, which the ABC has not released, reportedly cover “at least 10” incidents between 2009 and 2013 in which military investigators summarily cleared soldiers of killing civilians or other war crimes.

Some of the atrocities, such as the killing of a captured detainee, were already known. Each inflamed popular hostility in Afghanistan to the Australian and other occupying forces. They underscore the inherently criminal character of the US-led Afghanistan war, now almost 16 years long.

However, the material only gives a partial glimpse of Australia’s war crimes. It appears to have been leaked in an effort, accompanied by belated military inquiries, to clean up the reputation of the Special Forces by blaming a minority of soldiers, supposedly caught up in a “warrior culture.”

Preparations are being made for even greater violence as part of an expanded force being planned by the Trump administration in a bid to reverse the increasing gains being made by the Taliban-led resistance.

One incident occurred on March 27, 2011 in Sah Zafar, Chora Valley. According to the ABC report, Australian and Afghan troops were sent to capture a “high-value Taliban target.”

After being shot at, the Australians returned fire and later found a dead man and a fatally injured child. Local people in a “distressed state” arrived at the scene and told the Australians that the dead man was the boy’s uncle, and that he was returning with his nephew from a medical clinic.

By the ABC’s account, “Australian soldiers tested the dead man’s hands and found traces of nitrate, which they said proved he had handled explosives and was an insurgent. However, this was later disproved, as there was no evidence the man was an insurgent, and nitrates are present within

commonly-used fertilisers in Afghanistan.”

Bags containing medication were also found at the scene, lending further credence to the residents’ version of events. Nevertheless, an inquiry found that the Australian troops were acting within Australian Defence Force (ADF) rules of engagement.

Other incidents included:

- Special Forces soldiers shot a young boy in Kandahar Province in 2012. Local villagers recovered the boy’s body, but the killing was never reported up the official chain of command. A secret new ADF investigation into this incident commenced in September 2016.

- A 14- or 15-year-old Afghan boy was killed in 2012, as were Bismillah Azadi and his six-year-old son during a raid on a house in 2013.

- Special Air Services (SAS) members killed two mullahs in 2012. Then Afghan President Hamid Karzai complained publicly about the killings, saying the deadly raid was not authorised by his government.

- An Afghan detainee was shot dead in 2013 after allegedly trying to seize an SAS trooper’s weapon. The Special Operations Task Group commanding officer—on the advice of a Defence lawyer—initially refused to hand over evidence to Australian Defence Force Investigative Service (ADFIS) officials, insisting it was a clear-cut case of self-defence.

- In 2013, Australian troops commanded by SAS officer Andrew Hastie, now a Liberal Party member of parliament, severed the hands of alleged dead Taliban fighters. This followed an ADFIS training session where soldiers were told such methods could be used for identification purposes.

Shortly before the ABC published its reports, it broadcast comments by a Special Forces “veteran” who said he had witnessed “the development of a culture within a minority of operators within special forces... seeking to ‘get kills up’ in some attempt to glorify themselves amongst their peers.”

The anonymous officer, who came from “middle management,” said there was no doubt “this behaviour has led to the death of large numbers of innocent civilians.” He called for action to “stop the infectious spread of this damning culture before it claims the reputation that precedes special operations command within the ADF and within militaries around the world.”

Such attempts to attribute the crimes to “bad apples” within the Special Forces are themselves a cover-up. Any brutal “culture” in the ADF is a direct result of the neo-colonial wars of occupation in the Middle East, which treat the population as a whole as the enemy and involve the killing of anyone who resists.

There is a protracted record of lawless brutality by Australian and other allied forces in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Accounts of war crimes committed by Australian Special Forces are not new. Internal investigations, in recent conflicts alone, go back to the Australian military intervention in East Timor in 1999.

The ADF paid out \$120,000 in compensation for incorrectly killed and injured Afghan civilians during 2009–2011 alone, according to an Amsterdam International Law Clinic report. With payments of less than \$2,000 per murder, that total indicates hundreds of casualties.

Moreover, the rules of engagement of the ADF and other US-led forces permit such killings. Military inquiries invariably found that soldiers acted within the rules, and no further action should be taken.

During the period covered by the reports, Afghans could be killed if they were allegedly “directly participating in hostilities.” This allowed the targeting of “spotters” suspected of keeping watch and relaying information to Taliban forces, without being armed themselves. “Spotters” could be shot for riding a motorcycle or talking on a radio.

The Australian Liberal-National government, backed by the Labor Party, last year opened the way for even worse atrocities by allowing the ADF to extend the rules of engagement to specifically permit the bombing or shooting of supposed supporters of insurgents “not taking an active part in the hostilities.”

The military’s actions have been whitewashed at the highest levels of the ADF, with the full support of successive governments. In May 2013, for example, Stephen Smith, the defence minister in the last Labor government, rejected complaints by Afghan detainees that they were subjected to humiliating public searches of groin and

buttocks areas, as well as poor food and cold cells.

The detainees had been captured by the ADF and incarcerated at a US military prison near Bagram air base. Smith flatly dismissed the reports and declared that Australians should be proud of the troops because “the ADF has prided itself on its high standards and it has a well regarded international reputation for doing so.”

In reality, the Australian Special Forces, like their US, British and New Zealand counterparts, specialise in secretive targeted killings and assaults on suspected villages. For that they were lauded by both US President George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

The new whitewashing of Afghanistan war crimes is a warning of further violence ahead. US Defence Secretary General James “Mad Dog” Mattis is reportedly proposing to add some 5,000 US soldiers to the nearly 9,000 already deployed in the country. At Washington’s request, Turnbull’s government recently committed another 30 troops to Afghanistan, taking the ADF contingent to 300. No doubt, a bigger contribution will be demanded if the Pentagon’s plans proceed.

During the Obama administration’s surge of 2010–2011, the US had some 100,000 soldiers deployed in the country—along with 30,000 from NATO and other US allies—yet still failed to quell the insurgency.

Since 2001, successive governments have justified the Afghanistan invasion as part of the “war on terror,” supposedly waged to protect the public. The truth is that US imperialism is determined to retain a permanent military presence in Afghanistan, which is strategically located near the oil- and gas-rich former Soviet republics of Central Asia, as well as China, Russia and Iran, which Washington regards as obstacles in its quest for global hegemony.

Russia has been attempting to broker a peace settlement between the Afghan regime and the Taliban. On the eve of a Moscow conference in April involving the regional powers, the US military unleashed the largest non-nuclear weapon in its arsenal on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, possibly killing hundreds more civilians.

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