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On the evening of February 12, some 25 friends and relatives gathered at the home of Hajji Sharaf Udin in the village of Khataba, a few miles outside Gardez, the capital of Paktia province in eastern Afghanistan. They were there to celebrate the naming of Udin's newborn grandson. "Sitting together along the walls of a guest room, the men had taken turns dancing while musicians played," *The Times (UK)* later reported. Before sunrise five innocent Afghan civilians, all relatives, would be murdered.

Around 3:00 am, one of the musicians went outside the compound to use the toilet. Someone shined a light in his eyes. He ran inside and yelled that the Taliban were outside. While most of the guests slept, Udin's son, Mohammed Dawood, a police commander, went out to investigate with his 15-year-old son Sediqullah. Perhaps under fire, no doubt in terror, father and son ran back across the courtyard. Both were shot by a gunman on the roof.

The Times (UK) reported (March 13) Dawood was killed instantly. His son was hit twice but lived.

Some in the compound realized that the attackers were not Taliban—but American Special Operations forces and Afghan police special forces, looking for 'suspected Taliban.' Udin's second son, Saranwal Zahir, a prosecutor, came to the door because he spoke some English. "Zahir shouted, 'don't fire, we work for the Government,'" Commander Dawood's mother said, "But while he was talking they fired again. I saw him fall down."

Three women were crouching behind Zahir in the doorway. Bibi Shirin, 22, the mother of four children under five; Bibi Saleha, 37, the mother of 11 children; and Gulalai, 18. Both mothers were pregnant. All three were gunned down by the volley that killed Zahir.

Two of the women died instantly. Gulalai, who was engaged to be married, was wounded and died later. "'We had already bought everything for the wedding,' her soon-to-be father-in-law, Sayed Mohammed Mal, the Vice-Chancellor of Gardez University, said."

All the survivors interviewed by
The New York Times

insisted that Americans had conducted the raid and the killings and that they were not in uniform.

Terrorizing and Brutalizing the Survivors

As if this weren't horror enough, the U.S. forces—who claim to be fundamentally different than the Taliban and fighting for the interests of the Afghan people—ignored the survivors' protests that they weren't Taliban.

Instead, according to an unpublished UN report obtained by *The Times (UK)*

, U.S. and Afghan government forces inflicted "cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment" on them. Guests and injured relatives were "assaulted by US and Afghan forces, restrained and forced to stand barefeet for several hours outside in the cold." One of the guests, a 22-year-old ambulance driver, said "he was dragged across the compound by his hair. 'The Afghans said put up your hands. I stood up and I don't know who was behind me. I was kicked from behind and fell over.'"

The survivors also said that "US and Afghan forces refused to provide adequate and timely medical support to two people [Dawood and his niece Gulalai] who sustained bullet injuries, resulting in their deaths hours later," according to the UN. They insisted both might have survived if they'd been taken to a hospital sooner.

Afterward eight survivors were arrested and flown to a U.S.-Afghan base, then held for four days and interrogated. All were released without charges.

Murder, Lies, Cover-up

Barack Obama and the U.S. military claim that they're implementing a new strategy. A strategy that's about helping the Afghan people; about bring them aid and assistance; about winning over the people and doing everything in their power—including changing their military tactics—to avoid civilian casualties.

If this were true, the U.S. military would have been horrified by the events in Gardez. It would have immediately admitted responsibility and launched a full investigation.

It has done none of these things. Instead, NATO attempted to cover up the massacre. On

February 12 it issued a statement titled "Joint Force Operating in Gardez Makes Gruesome Discovery."

An Afghan-international security force found the bound and gagged bodies of three women during an operation in the Gardez district, Paktiya Province last night.

The joint force went to a compound near the village of Khatabeh, after intelligence confirmed militant activity. Several insurgents engaged the joint force in a fire fight and were killed. Subsequently, a large number of men, women, and children exited the compound, and were detained by the joint force. When the joint force entered the compound they conducted a thorough search of the area, and found the bodies of three women who had been tied up, gagged and killed. The bodies had been hidden in an adjacent room.

The joint force immediately secured the area and requested expert medical support and will conduct a joint forensic investigation. Eight men were detained for further questioning.

Every part of this statement is a lie. There was no firefight. The victims didn't throw even a stone. The women were not tied up, gagged, hidden or found dead. U.S. forces refused to give the wounded medical treatment. And there has been no investigation or accounting.

The truth about this made-in-the-USA massacre only came out because the people of Gardez refused to be silent, (their "protests brought Gardez, the capital of Paktia, to a halt,"

The Times (UK)

reports) and because a prominent international newspaper reported their story.

Yet even after

The Times (UK)

exposure, U.S. and NATO officials continue to lie and stonewall a month after the massacre.

Rear Admiral Greg Smith, NATO's spokesperson in Kabul, told the

Times

there had been no cover-up, claiming that the men U.S. forces shot were armed and showing "hostile intent," and that NATO's February 12 statement had been "poorly worded," but the women appeared to have been dead for hours "to people who see a lot of dead bodies." As late as March 14, NATO officials continued to claim that the women's deaths were the result of an "honor" killing.

Murder of Civilians—Built into the U.S. War and Occupation

Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, has recently made a public show of apologizing for civilian casualties and promising to end them. The military is now supposedly imposing tighter controls on night raids, Special Operation forces, and private military contractors.

Yet night raids, special operations, covert assassinations, extrajudicial killings, drone strikes, the use of military contractors, massive detentions and torture, and all-around terror are embedded in the nature of this imperialist occupation. This occupation's central goal is subduing—by any means necessary—a population in which most don't want to be under foreign domination and many have learned through eight-plus bitter years of war and occupation to distrust if not hate the American occupiers and the flunkies they've empowered in Kabul. The goal driving this is furthering U.S. imperialist interests in Afghanistan and the region, not liberating the Afghan people. In both Afghanistan and Pakistan violence, troop levels, and the numbers of military contractors have all greatly escalated under Obama, even as the Pentagon may be trying to limit what it considers certain counter-productive excesses.

The Gardez massacre and the U.S. military's response shines a light on these horrors, which have been deliberately hidden by the U.S. power structure—from the President, to the Pentagon, to the media.

Consider the following. The team that massacred the Udin family near Gardez was based at Baghram Air Base, home to a massive prison, interrogation and torture operation. Its action took place
after
a January 23 order supposedly limiting night raids.

The
Washington Post
("When the CIA's intelligence-gathering isn't enough," March 18, 2010) reports that private military contractors who have been accused of targeting people for assassination by the military are operating in Paktia province. Might they be tied to this massacre?

Even NATO's efforts to cover up the Gardez massacre indicate how U.S. forces operate normally. NATO's spokesperson, in explaining U.S. actions, admitted that the victims "were not the targets of this particular raid," but still justified their murder saying, "I don't know if they fired any rounds.... If you have got an individual stepping out of a compound, and if your assault force is there, that is often the trigger to neutralise the individual. You don't have to be fired upon to fire back."

Think about this statement. What's being said, in essence, is that it's standard operating

procedure to kill any Afghans who could possibly be hostile, suspicious, or uncooperative—whether they're the right "targets" or not—even if they're in their own homes and simply stepping out to see who is threatening them.

And consider the fact that, according to

The Times (UK),

"A US official in Kabul refused to identify the force involved, citing 'utmost national and strategic security interests.'" Why is it in NATO's "utmost national and strategic security interests" to cover up this operation? Because these kinds of operations are a core part of the entire U.S.-NATO military strategy and occupation.

In fact, while much is being made of preventing U.S.-military controlled private contractors from carrying out assassinations,

The Times (UK)

) notes a way the Pentagon may get around new restrictions: "The United Nations has criticised intelligence agencies in Afghanistan in the past for using paramilitary groups to carry out 'extrajudicial killings.' If the force was controlled by the CIA or Afghanistan's domestic intelligence service it would be exempt from new Nato guidelines designed to limit night raids, which came into force on January 23."

Finally, the U.S. press, acting as cheerleaders for the war, have barely covered the story, which

The Times (UK)

broke on March 13. Since then the

Washington Post

hasn't reported on it at all, and the

New York Times

didn't cover it until March 16, when rather than focusing on the massacre, included a few paragraphs on it the middle of a long article titled "U.S. Is Reining In Special Forces in Afghanistan."

"They didn't come here to end terrorism. They are terrorists"

The Gardez massacre is also a brutal illustration of the reactionary character of the U.S. occupation. The U.S. has offered \$2,000 "compensation" to the family for each victim.

"Before, when I heard reports of raids like this and elders said [foreign troops] only came to colonise Afghanistan, I told them they are here to help us," said Sayed Mohammed Mal, the vice-chancellor of Gardez University, whose son Mansoor was Gulalai's [one of those murdered] fiancé. "But when I witnessed this in my family's home, I realised I was wrong. Now I accept the things those people told me. I hate [foreign forces]. I hate the Government."

"My father was friends with the Americans and they killed him," said Commander Dawood's son. "They killed my father. I want to kill them. I want the killers brought to justice."

"The foreigners are always talking about human rights. But they don't care about human rights," said Gulalai's father, Mohammed Tahir. "They teach us human rights then they kill a load of civilians. They didn't come here to end terrorism. They are terrorists."

If you pretend there's no war going on, if you say, "give Obama a chance" or "he's doing his best to wind down the war," or if you refuse to actively protest this war, you need to face the fact that you're actually telling the people of Afghanistan that slaughters like these don't bother you enough to really do much of anything about them—or worse, that they're OK with you.

Sources

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