

Criminally Complicit Mass Media

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international / mass media / other press

Afghan Children Executed By US-led Forces

Ignoring or downplaying Western crimes is a standard feature of the corporate Western media. On rare occasions when a broadcaster or newspaper breaks ranks and reports 'our' crimes honestly, it is instructive to observe the response from the rest of the media. Do they follow suit, perhaps digging deeper for details, devoting space to profiles of the victims and interviews with grieving relatives, humanising all concerned? Do they put the crimes in perspective as the inevitable consequence of rapacious Western power? Or do they look away?

One such case is a report that American-led troops dragged Afghan children from their beds and shot them during a night raid on December 27 last year, leaving ten people dead. Afghan government investigators said that eight of the dead were schoolchildren, and that some of them had been handcuffed before being killed. Kabul-based Times correspondent Jerome Starkey reported the shocking accusations about the joint US-Afghan operation. But the rest of the UK news media have buried the report.

After details of the massacre first emerged, Afghan President Karzai sent a team of investigators to the alleged scene of the atrocity in the village of Ghazi Kang in eastern Kunar province. Assadullah Wafa, a former governor of Helmand province, led the investigation. He told The Times that US soldiers flew to Kunar from Kabul, implying that they were part of a special forces unit:

"At around 1 am, three nights ago, some American troops with helicopters left Kabul and landed around 2km away from the village. The troops walked from the helicopters to the houses and, according to my investigation, they gathered all the students from two rooms, into one room, and opened fire." (Jerome Starkey, 'Western troops accused of executing 10 Afghan civilians, including children', The Times, December 31, 2009; <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/Afghanistan/article6971638.ece>)

Wafa continued:

"I spoke to the local headmaster. It's impossible they were al-Qaeda. They were children, they were civilians, they were innocent. I condemn this attack."

The Times reporter interviewed the headmaster who told him that the victims were asleep in three rooms when the troops arrived:

"Seven students were in one room. A student and one guest were in another room, a guest room, and a farmer was asleep with his wife in a third building.

"First the foreign troops entered the guest room and shot two of them. Then they entered another room and handcuffed the seven students. Then they killed them. Abdul Khaliq [the farmer] heard shooting and came outside. When they saw him they shot him as well. He was outside. That's why his wife wasn't killed."

A local elder told the Times reporter: "I saw their school books covered in blood."

The dead children were aged from 11 to 17.

In Kabul, the massacre sparked demonstrations with protesters holding up banners showing photographs of dead children alongside placards demanding "Foreign troops leave Afghanistan" and "Stop killing us".

Nato's International Security Assistance Force told The Times that there was "no direct evidence to substantiate" Wafa's claims that unarmed civilians were harmed in what it described as a "joint coalition and Afghan security force" operation. The spokesperson claimed:

"As the joint assault force entered the village they came under fire from several buildings and in returning fire killed nine individuals."

The slippery military response did not even get the number of victims right: it was ten, not nine.

Jerome Starkey published a follow-up report, recounting President Karzai's vain plea for the gunmen to face justice. ('Karzai demands that US hands over raiders accused of village atrocity', The Times, January 1, 2010).

But the rest of the British media appear to have shown virtually zero interest in either refuting or confirming the report of schoolchildren being executed. As far as our media searches can determine, there were only three press reports in major UK newspapers that mentioned it; and even then, only in passing.

In a brief weekly news digest, the Sunday Telegraph devoted 45 words to accusations of the atrocity, repeating the propaganda version of it as "a raid in which US forces shot dead 10 people at a suspected bomb factory." (Walter Hemmens and Alex Singleton, 'The Week; that was', Sunday Telegraph, January 3, 2010).

A 136-word item in the Mirror led, not with accusations of the execution of schoolchildren, but with the deaths of American civilians killed elsewhere in a suicide attack at a military base in Afghanistan (Stephen White, 'Base blast kills Eight US civilians', The Mirror, January 2, 2010).

The Guardian spared 28 words at the end of a report on the death of a British bomb disposal expert to note that: "The Afghan government says that 10 people were killed, including eight schoolchildren, in a village in eastern Kunar province in a night raid by international forces last weekend." (Adam Gabbatt, 'British bomb disposal expert dies after Afghan blast: "His sacrifice and courage will not be forgotten": Death brings the total toll to 245 since war began' Guardian, January 2, 2009). As ever, the headline summed up the priorities precisely: British lives count; Afghan lives are of lesser importance.

To the corporate media's shame, it was left to the US-based journalist Amy Goodman to interview Times correspondent Jerome Starkey on her excellent independent news programme, Democracy Now! The programme reported that a preliminary investigation by the United Nations reinforced Afghan claims that most of the dead were schoolboys. (Jerome Starkey interviewed by Amy Goodman, 'US-Led Forces Accused of Executing Schoolchildren in Afghanistan', Democracy Now!, January 6, 2010; http://www.democracynow.org/2010/1/6/us_led_forces_accused_of_executing)

Goodman asked Starkey what had been the response of NATO forces to the allegations. He said

"Well, initially, US and NATO forces here were very slow to say anything at all, and that possibly reflects the most secret nature of this raid. The fact that, according to Afghan investigators, these troops appear to have flown to the scene from Kabul appears to confirm speculation that this was an operation carried out by some sort of Special Forces unit, possibly even by some sort of paramilitary unit attached to one of the intelligence agencies, the foreign intelligence agencies, which operate occasionally out of the capital."

Starkey emphasised again that he had spoken to the headmaster who had given him the names and school registration numbers of all of the dead pupils. An additional tragic detail was that the headmaster was an uncle of the eight children.

The Times correspondent was candid that it had not proven possible to verify all of the details of the reported massacre:

"Given the nature of the environment, we haven't been able to travel there ourselves, and we've been relying on telephone interviews with people who are there and people who've visited the scene."

But he also made it clear that the US-led occupation authorities were giving out very little information, and had refused Afghan requests to provide details of the gunmen or to hand the men over.

The reported events are sickening. But we have been unable to find a single mention of the alleged atrocity on the BBC website. We emailed news editors at the BBC, ITN and Channel 4 News, asking why they had not reported these serious allegations of schoolchildren being executed in a US-led operation. None of them have replied. The lack of interest shown by the British news media in pursuing this story is damning indeed.

The famous maxim of the three wise monkeys who 'See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil' is an apt description of the corporate media's response to evidence for Western atrocities.

SUGGESTED ACTION

The goal of Media Lens is to promote rationality, compassion and respect for others. If you do write to journalists, we strongly urge you to maintain a polite, non-aggressive and non-abusive tone.

Mark Thompson, BBC director general
Email: mark.thompson@bbc.co.uk

Helen Boaden, BBC news director
Email: helenboaden.complaints@bbc.co.uk

Please send a copy to the Chair of the BBC Trust which is responsible for ensuring that the BBC upholds its obligations to the public:

Michael Lyons
Email: michael.lyons@bbc.co.uk

David Mannion, editor-in-chief, ITV News
Email: david.mannion@itn.co.uk

Jim Gray, editor, Channel 4 News
Email: jim.gray@itn.co.uk

A fuller list of media contacts can be found at:
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