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زبانهای اروپایی

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26.09.2019

Australian troops accused of war crimes in Afghanistan

An episode of Channel Nine's "60 Minutes" program on Sunday night featured new details of alleged war crimes committed by Australian Special Forces (SAS) soldiers in Afghanistan. The allegations included testimony from whistleblowers within the organisation and comments from Afghan civilians whose relatives were murdered.

The program followed a two-year investigation by a number of journalists, including from the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*, which has implicated the SAS in extrajudicial killings, the desecration of corpses and other violations of international law. The exposures resulted in an unprecedented police raid on the Sydney headquarters of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) in June, and secretive official investigations by the Australian Federal Police and the Inspector-General of the Defence Department.

Most explosively, the program alleged that Ben Roberts-Smith, one of Australia's most highly-decorated soldiers and a widely-feted public figure, kicked an Afghan civilian off a cliff before he was murdered by another soldier. Nine Media publications had previously alleged that Roberts-Smith was involved in incidents under investigation without providing details.

According to the program, Roberts-Smith and his colleagues were deployed to Darwan, a small village in Uruzgan province, in September 2012. They were tasked with finding an Afghan soldier who had shot several Australian troops.

The SAS troops allegedly rounded up a number of Afghan civilians, including Ali Jan, an impoverished farmer who had travelled to the town to collect supplies.

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“60 Minutes” interviewed two anonymous soldiers, who it claimed are serving members of the SAS. Both claimed that Jan was handcuffed, before being led up a sandy cliff. They allege that the farmer was then placed near the edge, before Roberts-Smith “took a short run-up” and kicked him off the cliff. Jan was then allegedly shot dead by another soldier. The whistleblowing soldiers said that the incident was similar to brutal killings portrayed in the film *300*, about Spartan warriors. They said that among some SAS soldiers, there was a pressure to “chalk up kills” and to disregard the laws of war.

Jan’s widow, Bibi Dhorko, who was interviewed, said that her slain husband “was innocent. He went to bring flour for his children.” She stated that he was unarmed, and had no relationship with the Taliban. She said: “I am so sad it becomes hard for the day and night to pass. I keep thinking about why this happened to me, why is he gone for no reason? Why did such cruelty happen?”

In another incident referenced on the program, SAS troops allegedly detained an injured Afghan man in October 2012. He was then dragged away from an army medic who was attempting to treat him and shot in the back of the head at point blank range. “60 Minutes” claimed to have viewed a letter from the SAS soldier confessing to the murder.

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Other war crimes previously alleged in the ABC’s “The Afghan Files”, included at least 10 extrajudicial killings by the SAS. Among the victims was a small boy, shot in Kandahar Province in 2012, along with a 14- or 15-year-old boy in a separate incident. Bismillah Azadi, an Afghan civilian, was killed during a raid on a house in 2013 as was his six-year-old son. SAS soldiers have also been accused of cutting-off the hands of corpses.

The official response to the exposures has been a combination of persecuting those who have exposed the crimes, along with an attempt to limit the damage and minimise the impact of the revelations.

This later course of action was on display on “60 Minutes” as Andrew Hastie, a former SAS captain and member of the federal Coalition government, shed crocodile tears over the deaths of Afghan civilians.

Hastie is the head of the powerful Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security. He has extensive ties to the US and Australian military-intelligence apparatuses and has advocated greater Australian involvement in US-led wars and military provocations, including against China.

On “60 Minutes,” he said that he supported the official inquiries into the conduct of SAS forces. His comments demonstrated, however, that they will be nothing more than a cover-up. Hastie stressed that the investigations would not target “fog of war” incidents. The examples he gave of conduct that would not be investigated included fatal air strikes against civilians that were supposedly the result of mistaken coordinates.

Others on the program, including its hosts, claimed that the actions of the SAS were the result of “rogue” soldiers, or isolated elements within the forces. This was aimed at covering-up the relationship between the predatory character of the 18-year occupation of Afghanistan by the US and its allies, and the horrific crimes documented in the program.

The actions of the SAS troops flowed directly from their role as an occupying force, trained to view the Afghan population as “the enemy,” and civilians as “potential insurgents.” The crimes allegedly committed by Special Forces soldiers occurred in the context of mass hostility toward the US-led subjugation of the country, which is aimed at securing resources and control of the geo-strategically critical Central Asian region.

Both the Coalition government and the Labor opposition have responded to the revelations of war crimes by hailing the SAS as “defenders of democracy” and expanding its budget.

At the same time, David McBride, a former military lawyer who leaked the documents that “The Afghan Files” was based is being prosecuted on a raft of secrecy charges that potentially carry decades of imprisonment.

The Australian Federal Police raid on the ABC in June, and statements by government ministers and police officials since, has confirmed that the authorities are also considering charging the journalists who have exposed the war crimes. This is of a piece with the complicity of all the official parties in the US attempt to prosecute WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange on 18 charges, carrying a maximum-sentence of 175 years imprisonment, for his role in exposing illegal US-led wars and global diplomatic intrigues.

25 September 2019