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Kansas City Star

Horrific, damaging photos from Afghanistan

03/24/2011

Photos of an American “kill squad” smiling as the soldiers pose with the bodies of murdered Afghan civilians reveal horrific evidence of what can go wrong on the field of battle. But world distribution of the photos, as is now occurring on the Internet, also puts at risk U.S. foreign policy and the safety of coalition troops on the ground.

In the past year it’s become clear that success in Afghanistan relies more heavily on coalition forces winning hearts and minds than winning battles. A single unit of U.S. soldiers going rogue makes the mission more difficult.

The photographs show the results of a five-member group of soldiers who took to killing for sport. The soldiers are seen holding up the heads of their young victims, in the manner of victorious hunters with their kill. The U.S. military is rightly apologizing and proceeding with courts-martial of those in the photos.

If it were possible to ban combatants from carrying cameras it might reduce the risk of such abuses coming to light. But stopping the abuses must be the primary mission. That means more training that re-emphasizes respect for human dignity, even in the heat of battle. There must be no repeat of these gruesome events.

The tragedy grows as the acts of a very few will be used to smear the overwhelmingly professional efforts of the many. There is no doubt that al-Qaida and the Taliban will use

these photos to increase anger and hatred toward U.S. troops worldwide, and that the photos will make gaining Afghan civilian trust a more difficult task.

As was the case in the wake of the Abu Ghraib horrors from 2004 in Iraq when then-President George W. Bush had to try to convince the Muslim world that such actions were an exception, it's now up to President Barack Obama to make that case.