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Boston Globe

NY Times probe cites PHR's Afghan work

By James F. Smith

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The New York Times today reports that the Bush Administration repeatedly discouraged investigations by the FBI and others into the alleged massacre of hundreds or perhaps thousands of Taliban prisoners in Afghanistan by a powerful warlord during the American invasion in November 2001.

The article on the Times website is based in part on research by the Cambridge-based organization, Physicians for Human Rights, which first discovered the mass graves of those prisoners in January 2002. Today, PHR called for a criminal investigation into what it called the Bush Administration's impeding of an FBI probe into the killings.

PHR's website has extensive details of its work over the years on the massacre, allegedly carried out by forces of warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, who was part of the pro-US Northern Alliance. The Taliban fighters were captured in the city of Kunduz and were stuffed into containers and transported by Dostum's forces; many were buried in mass graves in the Dasht-e-Leili desert near Sheberghan, Afghanistan.

PHR today cites US government documents saying that "as many as 2,000 surrendered Taliban fighters were reportedly suffocated in container trucks by Afghan forces operating jointly with the US in November 2001."

Dostum has insisted in the past that fewer than 200 people died and that the deaths were unintentional. The New York Times account quotes some former officials as saying that the Bush Administration did not actively quash any investigations, but others made it clear

that any such probe would be politically sensitive, and they made no effort to help look into the charges.

The New York Times account, by investigative reporter James Risen, says US officials were reluctant to go after Dostum in part because he was on the payroll of the Central Intelligence Agency and his fighters had worked with US special forces to topple the Taliban regime.

The Times says the Obama Administration is more likely to allow a probe to go ahead, especially because Afghan President Hamid Karzai recently brought Dostum back from exile to take up a senior position in his government. The Times says the US government has objected privately to Karzai about the appointment.

PHR researcher Nathaniel Raymond, who has been investigating the case for years, said in a statement: "Contrary to the legal opinions of the previous Department of Justice, the principles of the Geneva Conventions are non-negotiable, as is their enforcement. President Obama must open a full and transparent criminal probe and prosecute any US officials found to have broken the law."

Susannah Sirkin, PHR's deputy director, said, "Our researchers documented an apparent mass grave site with reportedly thousands of bodies of captured prisoners who were suffocated to death in trucks. That was 2002; seven years later, we still seek answers about what exactly happened and who was involved."

"PHR is calling once again for a full investigation into what we consider to be an alleged war crime of historic magnitude," she added.