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www.afgazad.com

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The New York Times

The Truth About Dasht-i-Leili

Editorial

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Add this to the Bush administration's sordid legacy: a refusal to investigate charges that forces commanded by a notorious Afghan warlord — and American ally — massacred hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Taliban prisoners of war in late 2001.

According to survivors and witnesses, over a three-day period, fighters under the command of Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum stuffed surrendering Taliban prisoners into metal shipping containers without food or water. Many suffocated. Guards shot others to death. The victims are believed to be buried in a grave in the desert of Dasht-i-Leili in northern Afghanistan.

Although the deaths were previously reported, The Times's James Risen has now detailed repeated efforts by the Bush administration to discourage any investigation of the massacre — even after officials from the F.B.I. and the State Department, along with the Red Cross and human rights groups, tried to press the matter. Physicians for Human Rights, which discovered the mass grave in 2002, says the site has since been tampered with. Satellite photos seem to bear this out.

General Dostum, unfortunately, had far too many powerful friends looking out for him. He was on the C.I.A. payroll and his militia worked closely with United States Special Forces in the early days of the war. President Hamid Karzai made him his military chief of staff. General Dostum was suspended last year after allegedly threatening a rival at gunpoint. Mr. Karzai recently reappointed him.

There can be no justification for the horrors or for the willingness of the United States and Afghanistan to look the other way.

President Obama has told aides to study the matter, and the administration is pressing Mr. Karzai not to return General Dostum to power. Mr. Obama needs to order a full investigation

into the massacre. The site must be guarded and witnesses protected.

Some current American officials say there are no grounds for the United States to investigate because only foreigners were involved and the alleged events occurred in another country. But human rights activists say the Uniform Code of Military Justice and the Geneva Conventions provide ample basis. They say American forces accepted the surrender of prisoners jointly with General Dostum. A NATO base was near the grave site.

There is more at stake than just the history books. Out of desperation or fear, many Afghans have again thrown their lot in with the Taliban. There is no chance of getting them to switch sides if they fear being massacred. If there is any hope of salvaging the war, American forces must persuade all Afghans that they and the Afghan government are truly committed to justice.