

War crimes

Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group

4 January 2021

The Brereton report about allegations of war crimes against Afghan civilians by Australian troops, mainly the Special Air Service Regiment, was met in November with gasps of shock by the capitalist media and the appointment of a special prosecutor to bring criminal charges. The prosecutor's appointment, however, was also the signal for the issue to drop out of the media and normal service to resume in the area of propaganda glorifying the military. When trials eventually occur, it will be years after the report, when the military have fabricated a story to exonerate the institution, whatever the fate of the individuals mentioned.

Australia's imperialist military and the governments that sent it to Afghanistan shouldn't get away with it so easily. The 39 murders named in the report are only the ones for which whistle-blowers could be found. There are rumours of many more. This is inherently plausible because of the nature of the practices the report itself describes:

- Execution of prisoners was done as "blooding" new team members with their first kill.
- Units carried "throwdown" weapons to plant on civilians they killed.
- All fighting age males found in combat zones, whether armed or not, were considered Taliban.

These features indicate that the murders discussed in the report are just the tip of the iceberg. The last point, indeed, is actual official US policy in waging the "War on Terror", so the rotten apple defence rings particularly hollow.

Having admitted that many war crimes had been committed, the Brereton report goes on to pin as much blame on sergeants and corporals as possible. Commissioned officers were found to be "bewildered" by evidence of crimes, while exhibiting "abandoned curiosity". These officers were not just incompetent or lazy. At best, they were wilfully ignorant. More likely, they were complicit through verbal arrangements about what they needed to know and what they didn't. There were credible accusations of war crimes already, dating at least to 2009, so the entire SAS command structure would have known whether their supervision was sufficient to detect such events if they occurred.

Beneath all this, however, is the guilt of Australia's military high command and the governments, both Coalition and Labor, that decided to send Australian troops to Afghanistan and keep

them there. Australia's Afghan War was never about Afghanistan, but about the US alliance. It was about supporting a US-dominated world order in which Australia has the South Pacific franchise. This requires supporting US military action in Asia and contributing enough military forces to be seen as a valuable ally deserving its own sphere of influence.

In these circumstances, the military effort in Afghanistan quickly became an occupation. All Afghan civilians were the enemy, unless they were known tools of the occupiers. And so the fighting age males were deemed fair game. Imperialist war cannot be waged justly, so the political decisions of John Howard, Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard and other Prime Ministers made the crimes of the soldiers on the ground inevitable. The soldiers named in the secret version of the report deserve to be in the dock, but so do their political masters.

The Brereton report revealed what could no longer be concealed. But the cover-up, both of further crimes and the guilty parties all the way from Lieutenants to Prime Ministers, has begun. Our best response is to demand that Australia get out of Afghanistan.

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