

Obama's War/Obama's Atrocities

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Since George Bush launched Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001 — the unjust, illegal, and unnecessary attack on Afghanistan — there have been constant US and NATO strikes on Afghan civilians, along with constant denials that such strikes have taken place. (These deaths were in addition to the deaths that resulted from disrupting the food distribution system, and are but a fraction of the number of people put at risk of starvation as a result of the US bombing.) Time and again, however, reporters have exposed Pentagon cover-ups and lies. Richard Lloyd Parry, who exposed one such US government lie (“A Village Is Destroyed. And America Says Nothing Happened,” *Independent*, Dec. 4, 2001) later commented: “The mullahs might have exaggerated the effects of the bombing, but they were never caught out in lies as big as those of the Pentagon.” (“War in Afghanistan: Has This Murky and Confusing War Solved Anything?” *Independent*, Dec. 28, 2001, p. 7)

Afghan wedding-goers are particularly vulnerable. Tom Engelhardt undertook the grisly task of keeping track of these attacks on wedding parties — he’s counted five so far — which the Pentagon touts as military targets.

It is almost certainly not the case that the US killed these civilians intentionally, in the sense of trying to kill civilians. But there is no doubt that Washington’s madly aggressive policies — the determination to kill as many of the enemy as possible and provide maximum protection to US forces — has led to a criminally reckless disregard for the lives of Afghan civilians. US officials indirectly acknowledged their criminal behavior when they announced in June 2009 new rules of engagement that prohibited attacks on militants when civilians were around and US troops were not in imminent danger and could safely withdraw — meaning that before this point, in such situations, the civilians could be routinely killed.

Frequent killings of civilians since June 2009 have shown that the new rules of engagement have not ended the reckless disregard. Nor have they ended the Pentagon practice of cover-up and lies. As Jerome Starkey has recently written for Nieman Watchdog (thanks to Stephen Soldz for this lead.), “U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan are committing atrocities, lying, and getting away with it.” Starkey reported in *The Times of London* that NATO claimed it killed two militants and then found the dead bodies of three bound and gagged women, two of them pregnant. But in fact, the dead militants were “loyal” Afghan civilian government workers and the women had been killed by NATO. NATO followed up its fabrication by impugning Starkey’s credibility. But this time the UN and other journalists were willing to corroborate Starkey’s story.

We are likely to be getting just the tip of the iceberg with these atrocity reports because, as Starkey notes, international forces “are rarely called to account because most reporters are too dependent on access, security and the ‘embed culture’ to venture out and see what’s happening for themselves.”

Obama may not be as crass as Bush, but the imperatives of counter-insurgency warfare, where you are defending a corrupt and illegitimate government, will inevitably lead to this sort of disregard for civilians.