

Massacre at Mazar

Jamie Doran

Jamie Doran is an international award-winning film producer and author who formerly worked at BBC Television. His documentary film, 'Massacre at Mazar', was shown at the European Parliament in Strasbourg. Since its previews there, despite many calls for an independent inquiry and protection of the evidence within a mass grave in Afghanistan, the official reaction from the United States, the United Nations and other bodies closely associated with the war in Afghanistan has been muted.

The bones are bleached white now, as though they had lain at this spot for centuries. But these human remains are just months old; the last proof of existence for young men who had expected the protection of the Geneva Conventions and, instead, died in horrific circumstances either through suffocation or summary execution.

Close up, the gnaw marks brought about by the incisors of canine nomads roaming the desert by night are easy to pick out. Jaw bones, ribs, fibulae and broken skulls are scattered around the top of an unnatural mound in the sand stretching to as much as fifty metres in length. Beside them, torn into many pieces, are parchments of clothing. A more detailed inspection reveals labels from Karachi, Lahore and elsewhere.

Dasht Leili: the final resting place of up to three thousand men, some of whom died of suffocation on a journey of hellish proportions and others, their brother prisoners lying next to them, who had pleaded and cried out for mercy before being executed in a hail of bullets. They had come to this godforsaken land to fight the infidels whom, they believed, were the enemies of their own God: religious fanatics who had been willing to give their own lives to defend their faith. None would have believed, before they set off on their collective pilgrimage from Pakistan, Chechnya, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and various Arab states, that it would end this way.

Afghanistan: a key domino in the pan-Islamic dream. Under the Taliban, an ultra-orthodox faction within the Muslim brotherhood, this country which had been devastated by decades of war (both with outsiders and within) had become a Mecca for those who adhered to the absolute word of the Koran. The world had seen their own peculiar interpretation of God's word through smuggled pictures of women, shrouded in the compulsory *Burkha*, being executed at the national football stadium in Kabul for crimes which, in the West, would result in little or no penalty at all. That same world knew also that, under the Taliban,

this country had become one of the most prolific producers of heroin, second only to Colombia and catching up fast. It was this particular issue which had drawn me to the region in the first place.

In April 2001, I had stood on the shores of the Amu Darya river separating Uzbekistan from its southern neighbour. I was investigating a new drugs smuggling route through the Central Asian countries. No more than two hundred metres from my position, Taliban border guards ambled lazily around the dilapidated concrete structures of Heiraton Port, which had once served as a crucial stepping-off point for thousands of tonnes of Soviet military hardware and tens of thousands of soldiers. Straddling the river to the east was the unfortunately-named 'Friendship Bridge', the centre of which was sealed by giant blocks of stone. Several months later, I would be taken secretly in the moments before dawn across this bridge to discover that there was, in fact, a small gap between the blocks and the side-railing. My Uzbek 'guardians' directed me to go through the gap where I was met by soldiers of the Northern Alliance who had succeeded in capturing not just Heiraton, but the strategically crucial city of Mazar-e Sharif just 50 minutes drive from the riverbank.

The battle for Mazar had proved to be the most decisive of the entire Afghan war and the key figure in that battle was General Abdul Rashid Dostum – a brilliant military strategist and the country's most feared warlord. In a throwback to the Middle Ages, Dostum had sent 1,000 horsemen racing uphill through the mountains west of Mazar to attack Taliban heavy-artillery positions. 'They didn't expect that,' said Dostum. 'Had I sent men on foot, they would all have been killed by the shelling. Using horses, we were able to get inside the range of their heavy guns quickly and the Talibs ran away.'

Over three hundred of those horsemen died in the charge but, despite the hefty losses, the Taliban collapse had begun. At the very height of the fighting, as Dostum battled at the gates of Mazar city itself, Al Jazeera television announced that he had been killed. The news came through as I was talking to his right-hand man, Commander Mammoo Hassan, on the frontline at the Kokcha River, tributary to the Amu Darya.

A sense of panic gripped those around us: should this be true, it would be the greatest set-back for the Northern Alliance since the assassination of Massood. But there was something in Hassan's demeanour, a calmness, portraying an absolute belief in the immortality of his friend and commander-in-chief.

Hassan asked to borrow my satellite phone 'to call the general'. I requested permission to record the call, which was agreed. Within minutes, the entire Northern Alliance hierarchy knew that its greatest military asset was alive and well.

Hassan: *'Abdul Rashid, they're saying you're dead. On Al Jazeera, they said you had been killed.'*

Dostum, laughing: *'I don't think so: maybe I should check. You shouldn't listen to this nonsense.'*

Hassan: *'How is the battle going?'*

Dostum: *'We need more ammunition, I'm having to buy bullets from anyone who will sell them to me. But it's going well and I've got twenty Americans with me; they're very professional.'*

This was the first confirmation from the Afghan war that US military personnel were at the core of the battle against the Taliban. Two weeks previously, Hassan had informed me privately that, within eight hours of Dostum capturing Mazar, the full Northern Alliance advance would begin. This duly occurred, but the magnitude of the Taliban collapse was entirely unforeseen. Kabul fell with ease: from Kokcha in the north east, from Taloqan and from Mazar, they fled south to the city of Kunduz. Up to fifteen thousand fighters, including several thousand of the Taliban's foreign supporters, were trapped in the city as twice that number of Northern Alliance soldiers laid siege to its boundaries.

It is now known that some escaped through a narrow corridor to the south and that others agreed to switch sides (a very common feature of Afghan warfare) to save their own hides. For the rest, their fate lay in the hands of negotiators. Central to this process was another local warlord, Amir Jhan, who enjoyed the mutual trust of the warring sides: *'All the local commanders in Kunduz were like my brothers and my friends. We had fought together in previous years and they asked me to liaise with the Northern Alliance to finalise the matter through negotiation rather than fighting. Some of the commanders, including Marza Nasri, Agi Omer and Arbab Hasham, persuaded the Al Qaeda and foreign groups to go along with us.'*

The first offer of settlement to the Northern Alliance was that the Taliban commanders were prepared to lay down their weapons to the United Nations or a multi-national force in return for certain guarantees: *'I was present when the [Taliban] mullahs Faisal and Nori came with other people to an arranged meeting at Kalai Janghi with Generals Dostum, Maqaaq and Atta. Some Americans were there, along with a few Englishmen. A decision was taken whereby the Afghans at Kunduz would give up their weapons and be allowed to return to their homes while the Al Qaeda and foreign fighters would surrender and be handed over to the United Nations.'*

Kalai Janghi, a large fortress on the outskirts of Mazar which the Taliban and, subsequently, Dostum used as military headquarters, would be central to future events but, even as a deal was being considered, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld intervened, apparently concerned that any negotiation to end the siege might eventually allow foreign Taliban to go free: *'It would be most unfortunate if the foreigners in Afghanistan – the Al Qaeda and the Chechens and others who have been there working with the Taliban – if those folks were set free and in any way allowed to go to another country and cause the same kind of terrorist acts'.*

In the following days, he was widely quoted as saying: *'My hope is that they will either be killed or taken prisoner. They're people who have done terrible things.'*

Northern Alliance commanders simply could not afford to ignore the words of their most important ally and paymaster, nor were they inclined to disagree. Revenge, or '*Intiqaam*', is virtually a national sport in Afghanistan and an atmosphere of bloodlust engulfed the city. A massacre, it seemed, was imminent.

The sense of urgency was not lost on Amir Jhan who raced between the opposing sides in an attempt to halt what appeared inevitable. Finally, on November 21, 2001, they reached a settlement: the entire Taliban force would surrender to the Northern Alliance in return for a pledge that their lives would be spared. Around 470 (including many suspected Al Qaeda) were taken to Kalai Janghi where they were incarcerated in the tunnels below one of its giant compounds.

On November 25, two CIA operatives arrived to carry out individual interrogations. During this process, a breakout occurred as the vanquished Taliban overpowered several guards, seized their weapons and began shooting. Within minutes, the CIA's Johnny 'Mike' Spann was dead, along with around thirty Northern Alliance soldiers. A fire-fight began, increasing in scale when the Taliban captured the fort's armoury, ludicrously positioned inside the same compound in which they were imprisoned. United States Special Forces on the ground called in air strikes while British SAS (Special Air Squadron) led the counter-attack.

By the third day of fighting, not a single Taliban remained alive on the surface of the fort – a highly unusual event in any military operation where one would expect to find even a few badly wounded combatants. The Western media, present in their hundreds at the Kunduz surrender, had moved *en masse* to Kalai Janghi where they filed reports of derring-do from the relative safety of the adjacent compound and even further away from the fighting.

Kalai Janghi had become the centre of world focus on the Afghan war and the subsequent discovery some days later of the American Taliban, John Walker Lindh, and 85 others who had survived in the tunnels below the fort merely served to strengthen that position. Incredibly, no-one seemed concerned to ask at the time: 'what happened to the others who surrendered at Kunduz'? It is the fate of these thousands of young men which has led to calls for formal independent and international inquiries following the showing of our preview film at the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

Their story will remain forever a dark stain on the hands of Northern Alliance soldiers, the Western media, the United Nations, the United States government and its military personnel. It involves another fort altogether, previously unmentioned in the Western press, where began a killing spree leading to the murders of up to 3,000 prisoners. Let us return to Amir Jhan, who helped negotiate the surrender: 'I counted them one-by-one; there were eight thousand. Now there are only 3,015 left. And among these 3,015 are local Pashtun people from Kunduz, Shiberghan, Balkh and Mazar who were not even amongst the original prisoners I handed over. Where are the rest?'

The answer to this question lies, partly at least, in that fifty-metre mound of

sand in the desert location of Dasht Leili. By simple arithmetic, over 5,000 are missing. A few may have escaped; others may have bought their freedom while even more may have been sold to the security agencies of their respective countries to encounter a fate, perhaps, even worse than death. But according to a number of key eyewitnesses found during a six-month investigation, the majority are buried in the sand. None of these witnesses received any payment and all placed themselves in great danger as a result of taking part in our film.

Their story begins at the fort of Kalai Zeini on the road from Mazar to Shiberghan. This fort, enormous even by Afghan standards, was used as a holding point for the thousands captured at Kunduz. The official objective was to transfer these prisoners to Shiberghan Prison where they could be held prior to interrogation by American experts. Those singled out would then be transferred to Guantanamo in Cuba.

At Kalai Zeini, they were forced to sit, side-by-side, across a vast field within the perimeters. Soon a convoy of trucks arrived with metal cargo containers fastened onto their chassis. The prisoners were then ordered to line up prior to being squeezed into these containers. An Afghan Northern Alliance officer, who agreed to speak on the basis of anonymity, takes up the story: ‘We were responsible for delivering the prisoners and we loaded twenty-five containers from Zeini to Shiberghan. We put around 200 people into each container.’

Compressed like sardines into these airless, pitch-black metal boxes in over 30 degrees of heat, the Taliban cried out for mercy. Their answer came swiftly, as explained in the words of another Afghan soldier who lends credence to his testimony by admitting to killing some of the prisoners himself:

Soldier: ‘I hit the containers with bullets to make holes for ventilation and some of them were killed.’

Interviewer: ‘You personally shot holes into the containers. Who gave you those orders, why did you do that?’

Soldier: ‘The commanders ordered us.’

But his honesty belies a matter of enormous cruelty. Many of the bullet holes in the containers we found appear at the bottom and middle, rather than at the very top. Had they truly been intended for purposes of ventilation, then survival might have been possible had those bullets been fired into the roof of the containers.

A local taxi driver had called in at one of the makeshift gas stations which litter the main roads: ‘At the time they were taking prisoners from Kalai Zeini to Shiberghan, I went to fill my car with petrol. I smelt something strange and asked the attendant where it was coming from. He said: ‘Look behind you’. There were three trucks with containers fixed on them. Blood was pouring from the containers. My hair stood on end, it was horrible. I wanted to move but couldn’t because one of the trucks had broken down and they had to tow it away [blocking my path].’

The following day, he stood outside his home in Shiberghan as an equally horrific sight caught his eye: 'I saw another three trucks loaded with containers driving past my house. It was raining with blood pouring from them.'

Some of the sealed containers did not receive the deadly relief of the gunman's bullet. Instead, for four or five days the prisoners were left to die of suffocation, hunger and thirst. When finally opened, a mangled jumble of urine, blood, faeces, vomit and rotting flesh was all that remained of the occupants.

The immediate question anyone who has entered Shiberghan Prison might ask is how such an institution, suitable to hold up to a maximum of 500 prisoners, could realistically have been expected to cater for as many as fifteen times that number? Was it really coincidence that many destined for this location would never arrive? As the containers with their cargo of human butchery began lining up outside the prison, one of the soldiers accompanying the convoy was present when the prison commanders received orders to dispose of the evidence with haste: 'Most of the containers had bullet holes in them. In each container maybe 150-160 had been killed. Some were still breathing but most were dead. The Americans told the Shiberghan people to get them outside the city before they were filmed by satellite.'

This accusation of United States involvement will be crucial to any future inquiry: international law and, indeed, national civil and military law relies to a very large extent on establishing the chain of command under which crimes took place. Put another way, it is a matter of determining who was running the show at Shiberghan.

We found two drivers from different regions who, on separate days, led us to the same spot in the desert. Visibly distressed due to their personal involvement, their accounts of the journey from Kalai Zeini through Shiberghan to Dasht Leili are harrowing in the extreme.

Driver One: 'There were about 25 containers. The conditions were very bad because the prisoners couldn't breathe so they shot into the containers. Many of the prisoners lost their lives. At Shiberghan, they offloaded the prisoners who were obviously alive. But there were some injured Taliban and others who were so weak they had gone unconscious. We brought them to this place, which is called Dasht Leili, and they were shot. I came here three times and each time I brought about 150 prisoners. They were shouting and crying when they were being shot. There were about ten or fifteen other drivers who made the same journey.'

Driver Two: 'They commandeered my truck from Mazar city without paying any money. They took my truck and loaded a container onto it and I carried prisoners from Kalai Zeini to Shiberghan and, after that, to Dasht Leili where they were shot by the soldiers. Some of them were alive, injured or unconscious. They brought them here, bound their hands and shot them. I made four trips backwards and forwards with prisoners. In total, I brought about 550-600 people here.'

Despite numerous sightings by local villagers, drivers and Northern Alliance

soldiers, the Pentagon continues to deny that American soldiers were present at the time in either Shiberghan or Dasht Leili. ‘They weren’t in the vicinity at all,’ according to Colonel David Lapan of Central Command. Colonel Lapan further stated that they had carried out an internal investigation and were satisfied that no United States soldiers had been present or witnessed atrocities of any kind. All calls for a formal inquiry have been rejected.

Driver One: ‘There were Jumbish [ethnic Uzbek] people and American soldiers at Shiberghan jail. I didn’t see any [Americans] here but I saw them at the prison and they may have been in the trucks.’

Driver Two:

Interviewer: ‘*When you brought the prisoners here, were there any American soldiers with you?*’

Driver: ‘*Yes, they were with us.*’

Interviewer: ‘*Here, at Dasht Leili?*’

Driver: ‘*Yes, here.*’

Interviewer: ‘*How many American soldiers were with you?*’

Driver: ‘*Lots of them: maybe 30-40. They came the first two times with us but I didn’t see them on the next two trips.*’

Months later, the bulldozer tracks were still visible on the final stages of the trail to the killing grounds of Dasht Leili: the bodies pushed into a hollow and then secreted under tons of sand. For those who survived the journey from Kalai Zeini to Shiberghan prison, their fate at the hands of American soldiers was little better than that of their brothers buried in the sands, according to other eyewitnesses. One soldier recounts an incident when he alleges a United States soldier murdered a Taliban prisoner in order, he claims, to frighten the others into talking: ‘When I was a soldier at Shiberghan, I saw an American soldier breaking a prisoner’s neck. Another time, they poured acid or something on them. The Americans did whatever they wanted; we had no power to stop them...everything was under the control of the American commander.’

One General in the Northern Alliance, who was also stationed at Shiberghan at the time, claims: ‘I was a witness. I saw them stab their legs, cut their tongues, cut their hair and cut their beards. Sometimes it looked as if they were doing it for pleasure. They would take a prisoner outside, beat them up and return them to the jail. But sometimes they were never returned and they disappeared, the prisoner disappeared. I was there.’

All of the witnesses in our film have agreed to attend any international inquiry

or court case which may result from their statements. Additionally, if given the opportunity they would be willing to identify the United States personnel involved.

While the accusations of torture and murder within Shiberghan prison may be difficult to substantiate so long after the event, a mass grave containing possibly thousands of prisoners lies just four kilometres away from that jail. If American servicemen were indeed involved in disposing of these prisoners, if they headed the chain-of-command, as alleged by many witnesses, and if they stood by as hundreds were summarily executed, then they are guilty of war crimes far beyond the simple guidelines of the Geneva Conventions.

While Congress rushes through new laws to prevent any American soldier from facing prosecution abroad, those senators and representatives may wish to consider the words of Andrew McEntee, a leading human rights lawyer and former Chairman of Amnesty International. He has read the full transcripts of our witness statements and viewed several hours of filmed evidence: 'I believe it is quite clear from the evidence presented that a wide-ranging and independent inquiry is essential. The prisoners have been disappeared involuntarily after being murdered. These are not simply crimes against international law, they are offences under the laws of various European countries, attracting 'universal jurisdiction' and, in particular, they are also offences under United States law.'

If the United States wishes to continue in and, even, expand its role as the world's policeman, standing firm against the forces of terror, it must be seen to be applying the rule of law and not of the gun.

The 1968 massacre at the Vietnamese village of My Lai and the United States Army court martial of Lieutenant William Calley may seem a very long time ago and the world may have changed in many ways since, but the basic tenets of law and justice remain the same. And, after all, the innocent have nothing to fear from the truth.

We are grateful to Le Monde Diplomatique for permission to print this important testimony.