



War Crimes and the White House

The Bush Administration's Cover-Up of the Dasht-e-Leili Massacre

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You may view this Physicians for Human Rights' video at AfghanMassGrave.org.

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(Transcript of Video)

FRANK DONAGHUE (CEO, Physicians for Human Rights): A new administration is in the White House. And the prison at Guantanamo Bay will soon be closed. But the investigation into war crimes must not close with it. Guantanamo is neither the end nor the beginning of the story. The Bush Administration's blatant disregard for the rule of law goes back before Gitmo, before Abu Ghraib, and before the CIA "Black Sites". It goes back to Dasht-e-Leili.

NARRATOR (Jared Voss): In November 2001, as many as 2,000 prisoners are believed to have been murdered by US Allied Afghan troops and buried in a mass grave in Dasht-e-Leili, Afghanistan. These Afghan troops were operating jointly with American forces.

The New York Times has revealed that the Bush administration blocked at least three separate investigations into these alleged war crimes.

This revelation comes after nearly eight years of advocacy and investigation by Physicians for Human Rights.

Citing a former FBI agent and other sources, the Times reports that, beginning in 2002, senior Bush administration officials obstructed a series of criminal probes by the FBI, Defense Department, and State Department.

This story begins in Northern Afghanistan, November 2001, when thousands of Taliban and foreign fighters surrendered to US Special Forces and the troops of Afghan warlord General Abdul Rashid Dostum, a notoriously brutal US ally in the Northern Alliance.

The prisoners were promised they would not be harmed.

NATHANIEL RAYMOND (PHR's Lead Researcher, Dasht-e-Leili Investigation): Instead, Dostum packed them in shipping containers where they were carried in a convoy through the desert. According to US government documents obtained by PHR, up to 2,000 people died during that convoy. They were buried at a place called Dasht-e-Leili, which is a mass grave site near Sheberghan, Afghanistan.

SUSANNAH SIRKIN (PHR Deputy Director): PHR discovered the grave while we were investigating the conditions at the Sheberghan prison in northern Afghanistan. Our team found conditions at that prison to be absolutely deplorable. There were 3,000 prisoners in an over-crowded place that lacked heat, adequate nutrition. Prisoners were dying of illness, and lack of sanitation, and hunger.

At the time, our investigators also heard stories about a mass grave right near the prison. And they saw some of the outlines of such a site. So under the auspices of the UN, our International

Forensic Program conducted an initial examination of part of the grave, exhumed some bodies, and conducted autopsies and found those deaths were consistent with suffocation.

NARRATOR: First privately and then publicly, PHR appealed to US and Afghan authorities to fully investigate this alleged massacre. They called for evidence to be preserved and witnesses protected. Despite these appeals, Afghan eyewitnesses were tortured, murdered, or simply disappeared.

NATHANIEL RAYMOND: The Pentagon had said that only a few dozen prisoners had died during transport, of their wounds or of disease. The Pentagon also said that they had verbally debriefed the Special Forces when they returned from Afghanistan, and didn't need to do further investigation.

NARRATOR: Not only was the incident not investigated, but that year, General Dostum was brought into the Afghan government as Deputy Defense Minister under President Hamid Karzai. And it has now been revealed that General Dostum was actually on the payroll of the CIA.

Two of Dostum's supporters were Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz. According to the New York Times, officials told Wolfowitz that Dostum may have committed a war crime. Wolfowitz said they would not go after him for that.

SUSANNAH SIRKIN: It was the policy of the US and Afghan governments to bring in the Afghan warlords who were, many of whom were alleged war criminals and were the cause of the mass graves across Afghanistan -- to bring them into the government.

NARRATOR: A few survivors of the Dasht-e-Leili massacre were transported to Guantanamo Bay, where Dell Spry served as Special Agent in Charge of FBI Interrogations.

NATHANIEL RAYMOND: According to the New York Times, Special Agent Spry and his team of FBI agents at Guantanamo interviewed 10 detainees. Special Agent Spry submitted this information to FBI headquarters in Washington. But he was ordered not to investigate.

NARRATOR: In August 2002, Newsweek magazine, using information provided by PHR, published an exclusive cover story detailing allegations about the massacre.

The release of this story pressured the US and Afghan governments to publicly voice support for a joint investigation.

But when the State Department attempted to launch this investigation, the Bush White House shut them down.

SUSANNAH SIRKIN: So over the next few years, PHR waited for an investigation to take place at the Dasht-e-Leili grave. We at the same time worked with the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission to train Afghan justice, police, and forensics people in the

techniques for documenting graves. And we started exercises to map all the mass graves in Afghanistan.

Our biggest fear all along was that someone might tamper with the Dasht-e-Leili grave and destroy the evidence up there. And at the same time, we kept seeking information from the US government, from the Afghan government, about the Dasht-e-Leili grave and what happened up there.

NARRATOR: With the White House continually blocking their requests for information and investigation, PHR had only one option left.

In 2006, they filed a Freedom of Information Act request seeking all US government documents related to Dasht-e-Leili. But the Bush Administration refused their request.

After being stonewalled for more than a year, PHR took legal action to force the Government to comply.

NATHANIEL RAYMOND: We sued. We won. And finally, we received documents that indicated the US government believed up to 2,000 prisoners died during the Dasht-e-Leili incident.

NARRATOR: Soon after they obtained those documents, a member of PHR's International Forensic Program discovered that the Dasht-e-Leili grave site had been compromised and evidence had been removed.

McClatchy Newspapers reported that, according to Afghan government officials and local law enforcement, fearing retribution, General Dostum allegedly had his men dig up the site and remove the remains.

SUSANNAH SIRKIN: And it looks as though today, much of the evidence in that grave has literally been removed. How could this happen after all of the information has come out about this site? After the Newsweek report? After PHR's investigation? After the UN has asked for protection? After the Afghan government and the US government have said that it is a crime that should be investigated?

NATHANIEL RAYMOND: Leading international law scholars who have reviewed the Dasht-e-Leili case believe that this massacre represents a gross violation of the Geneva Conventions and is a war crime. Under international law, the cover-up of a war crime is itself a war crime.

NARRATOR: From Afghanistan to Guantanamo Bay, from the FBI to the White House, the Bush Administration covered it up.

FRANK DONAGHUE: Witnesses have been tortured and killed and evidence has now been destroyed. US law enforcement was obstructed by the Bush administration. But, PHR, working side-by-side with some of the nation's top investigative journalists, continued to pursue truth and

accountability. Without these reporters, and without Physicians for Human Rights, this story never would have been told.

And it's now up to Attorney General [Eric] Holder to continue the work that PHR and others have started. And it's now up to you to join PHR in demanding that justice be served. Sign our petition calling on our elected leaders to conduct a fair, full, non-partisan examination of the facts.

NARRATOR: To learn more and take action, visit AfghanMassGrave.org.

FRANK DONAGHUE: And help make accountability a reality.

Physicians for Human Rights acknowledges the work of:

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Physicians for Human Rights also pays tribute to the many individuals who lost their lives or have suffered greatly on account of their witness to the incidents described in this film.