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Physicians for Human Rights Renews Calls for Full Forensic Investigation into Alleged Killing of Taliban Prisoners; Immediate Protection of Graves Urgently Needed

Video testimonies released yesterday in Germany by British filmmaker Jamie Doran implicate US armed forces and Northern Alliance fighters in the deaths of Taliban prisoners and the disposal of their remains in graves near Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan. These graves were first visited in January by a team from Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), subsequently leading to international attention and a preliminary forensic assessment completed in February by PHR's International Forensic Program.

PHR personnel seconded to the United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan (UNAMA) revisited the site in May and dug a test trench that revealed the remains of 15 people. The team also performed autopsies on three bodies that suggested suffocation was the cause of their death. PHR believes the site could be the disposal ground of Taliban prisoners who had surrendered to the Northern Alliance in November and December 2001. [PHR has separately reported on the conditions of the nearby Shebarghan prison, which a PHR team visited in January.]

The video testimonies contain eyewitnesses claiming to have seen US military personnel and others beat, torture, shoot, and execute captured Taliban fighters after the fall of Kunduz in November 2001. These witnesses, some of whom identify themselves as drivers of container trucks carrying prisoners, also attest to US and Northern Alliance involvement in the disposal of dead prisoners. PHR has not been able to determine the credibility of the allegations made by these alleged eyewitnesses in the film. However, the testimonies, which are sufficiently detailed, along with the fact that PHR investigators found recent remains in the area described by the alleged witnesses, underscore the need for a full investigation.

PHR urgently reiterates its call for immediate protection of the gravesite by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) or proper authorities as well as the need for a full forensic investigation of the site to ensure that the responsible parties are held accountable.

"If these sites and others are not protected and thoroughly investigated, an accurate accounting will not be possible," said Leonard S. Rubenstein, PHR's executive director.

For the past five months, PHR has been urging the Afghan Interim Authority, the United Nations, the United States, and its coalition partners to protect the mass grave sites in Afghanistan and to develop a plan for their careful and objective investigation. In a March 1 letter delivered to Chairman Hamid Karzai and copied to all permanent members of the UN Security Council, PHR said, "proper examination of bodies found in mass graves and dignified burial of remains are essential elements of a truth and accountability process" and that "such a process is also critical for future peace and stability in Afghanistan." (text of letter is available at: www.phrusa.org/research/afghanistan/karzai_letter.html)

To date, no action has been taken by the international community to secure the integrity of the sites or to initiate a full exhumation of the graves.

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