

GENERAL CAMPBELL NOT A FAN OF AN INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATION INTO MSF STRIKE [UPDATED]

General John Campbell, who is in charge of military operations in Afghanistan testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee Tuesday. There was a telling exchange between him and Jeanne Shaheen.

After talking about how much everyone regrets the *accident* of targeting Médecins Sans Frontières, Shaheen asked Campbell if he would support an independent inquiry into what happened (that MSF continues to demand). Here's the exchange:

Shaheen: I appreciate your talking about the effort to conduct an investigation on our part but do you have any reason to object to having an independent investigation done by the UN or another independent body of what happened?

Campbell: Ma'am, I have trust and confidence in the folks that will do the investigation for NATO, the folks that'll do the investigation for DOD and the Afghan partners, and so all the very very tough questions that we're asking they will get after that. My investigating officer again is a Brigadier General, Rich Kim, I have all the trust and confidence that he will, he will get answers to all of those questions, and he'll continue to work that very hard and will continue to be transparent and provide all of that to this committee and to the American people as we move forward.

Shaheen: But as I understand your

answer, then, you would not object to and would cooperate with an independent body, other than NATO or our Department of Defense in doing that kind of an investigation.

Campbell: I would let my higher headquarters or senior personnel make that decision. We are reaching out, again, to Doctors without Borders and the personnel that were on site, making sure that we get all side of the story, I did talk again to the investigating officer this morning, he has done that, he has talked to a few, he's continuing to try to get out to locations where he can talk to doctors, nurses, survivors of that to make sure he gets all of that.

All of which is a roundabout way to say he's been sent out here to try to squelch calls for an investigation by anyone besides a Brigadier General. Later in the hearing, Campbell dodged a question from Mike Rounds about how long this might take, though did say he would probably have a preliminary investigation done in a month.

Someone must have been panicked by Shaheen's question because Dan Sullivan, in using his term to clean up some issues, addressed Shaheen's question and helped the General shoot down the possibility of an investigation.

Sullivan: Senator Shaheen had asked about a UN investigation, possibly, into the hospital accident. Does the UN usually investigate major deliberative – deliberate attacks on civilians in Afghanistan when they're conducted by the Taliban?

Campbell: Sir, I haven't seen it in the past. Quite frankly I don't know –

Sullivan: I don't think they do, typically. Do you think it would

seem fair or balanced if the UN conducted an investigation which was clearly on something that was accidental? – the hospital bombing – when they don't investigate deliberate Taliban killing of civilians. Do you think that would be viewed as fair or balanced or as something the Command needs or would welcome?

Campbell: Sir I can't comment on how the UN would do that. What I can comment on as I said up front earlier is I have complete trust and confidence in the team that we have to be thorough, transparent. And if there were mistakes made, we'll make sure that those come out, if there's people we have to hold accountable, we'll make sure we'll do that. I have every trust and confidence in the US and the NATO investigation ongoing, uh, –

Sullivan: I think so do, most of us here do as well. Not, I don't, I certainly don't think an additional investigation by the UN would be warranted or be welcome by this committee.

In other words, people *really* don't want an independent investigation of this.

Update: Sullivan is wrong about whether the UN investigates Taliban killing of civilians. ~~While the UN hasn't done a lot of recent human rights reporting — aside from a report on the status of women — when it did do reporting~~ It includes the Taliban's targeting of civilians in its findings, as in this 2008 report.

27. Over the past four months, the Taliban and other anti-government elements have killed approximately 300 civilians. Roughly three quarters of these civilians were killed in suicide attacks. While the majority of suicide attacks appear to target legitimate

military objectives, many of these attacks are nonetheless unlawful because it should be obvious that they will result in far more civilian than military deaths.

28. Most of the other civilians killed by the Taliban die as a result of targeted assassinations. While these killings are fewer in number, they are significant in terms of intimidating and repressing the population. Often, killing one teacher will close an entire area's schools, killing one proponent of the Government will intimidate many others, and killing one worker will end humanitarian access to a district. These assassinations are completely unlawful, and their consequences are dramatic. The Taliban have also engaged in a high level of unlawful killing of non-civilians.

There's far more discussion of the Taliban's war crimes, including discussions of specific incidents, in this 2009 report.

Update: I understated how much work the UN is doing on human rights violations in Afghanistan, as Sarah Knuckey lays out at Just Security.

The UN's mid-year and annual reports on civilian casualties in Afghanistan typically detail anti-government attacks. The photo on the front cover of the most recent UN report on Afghanistan, for example, shows the horrific scene directly after an anti-government element attack in April 2015, in which 32 were killed and 126 injured. The report's executive summary begins with the testimony of a schoolteacher who witnessed the attack and describes "the blood, the human limbs, the corpses, and the other wounded people all over the street." Pages 41-77 of the report detail Taliban violence,

describing suicide attacks, the use of improvised explosive devices, indiscriminate and deliberate attacks on civilians, and the war crime of murder. It includes a section specifically on suicide and complex attacks, in which 1,022 civilian casualties occurred in just the first six months of 2015.

Many other UN reports also detail the findings of its investigations into Taliban/anti-government element attacks: July 2014 (the cover shows a child injured by a Taliban attack on the Serena hotel), February 2014 (the cover shows a child injured in an IED attack), July 2013 (the cover shows children running from a Taliban attack), February 2013 (the executive summary begins with a gruesome witness account of an IED attack, obtained through UNAMA interviews) , February 2012 (cover shows the aftermath of a suicide attack), July 2012 (cover shows the consequences of an IED attack that killed 13 and injured 57), and so on. A great many UN press statements also regularly condemn Taliban violence.

There are also examples of other parts of the UN system reporting on Taliban attacks. In 2009, for example, a separate part of the UN – the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions – carried out investigations in Afghanistan, including into killings by the Taliban, and detailed reckless as well as deliberate Taliban attacks, including Taliban assassinations of civilians.

Update: This post has been significantly updated with the transcripts of the two exchanges and links to UN reporting on Taliban targeting of civilians.