



Inter Press Service News Agency

THE STORY UNDERNEATH

Thursday, December 27, 2007 13:00 GMT

[Latest News](#)[Contact Us](#)[Readers' Opinions](#)[Search](#)

## **POLAND: Facing War Crimes in Afghanistan**

**Zoltán Dujisin**

**PRAGUE, Dec 27 (IPS) - Poland has woken up to the possibility that its troops in Afghanistan were involved in a war crime against defenceless civilians.**

The reported events have shocked a public which remains sensitive to the performance of its country's military missions abroad. But Polish authorities have kept the flow of information under control, leaving the media the task of digging out the truth.

In August separate Polish and U.S. patrols were struck by explosive devices. Polish reinforcements soon arrived and opened fire on a nearby village.

The mortar attack on the village of Nangar Khel, close to the Afghan-Pakistani border, killed eight Afghani civilians and left three women crippled. A pregnant woman and a child were among the dead.

"We are very concerned about a possible war crime, a lot of Poles cannot believe our soldiers could commit such a crime," Jacek Przybylski, deputy foreign editor of the leading Polish daily Rzeczpospolita told IPS.

But many others in Poland want exemplary punishment for the soldiers, a formal apology to Afghanistan, and large compensation paid to the victims' families.

If the war crime is proven, six of the seven perpetrators, who have been held in state custody, could face life in prison. But more officers might be accused as the investigation unfolds.

On Nov. 13 the military prosecution, citing secret evidence, ascertained that there was no exchange of fire, and that the civilians had been fired upon with the intent to kill them. The prosecutor's office filed charges against seven soldiers, who stand accused of violating international law.

The prosecution sees no mitigating circumstances in the case, and maintains that no error or hardware failure can account for the way the mortars were aimed by some of Poland's supposedly best soldiers.

No Taliban members are believed to have been in the village, though initially the soldiers accused reportedly told their commanders that they had been shot at from the village. The officers involved are also accused of hindering the investigation.

Citing unnamed sources, the prestigious daily Gazeta Wyborcza claims that the evidence could include video footage of a Polish soldier entering the bombarded village. According to this report, the behaviour of the Polish troops was appalling.

In statements to the press earlier, commander of the Polish military contingent in Afghanistan Gen. Mark Tomaszycski said soldiers did not enter the village, and only fired from a distance.

Tomaszycski said the soldiers did not claim to have been fired upon, but only that there had been some contact with Taliban.

Questions have since arisen why commanders gave the order to open fire on the civilian settlement -- and why these orders were followed. It remains unclear how informed the soldiers' superiors were on the details of the

operation and what their level of responsibility is.

Military prosecutors apparently have not interrogated senior officers yet, though this is required by North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) procedures, raising suspicion that responsibilities might be concealed and the soldiers used as scapegoats.

The daily Rzeczpospolita bases such claims on information given to it by an unnamed officer serving in Afghanistan.

The daily reports that the defence will consider responsibility by commanders and politicians, since it believes the contingent's commanders could have coordinated a version of the story with the soldiers, promising them the case would die out.

Citing court documents, Polish radio station RMF maintains that one soldier refused to follow his superiors' orders and left, and that later a deputy commander told the remaining soldiers they should not be concerned about rockets hitting the village.

The defence is also raising the possibility that the killing could have been caused by a faulty mortar gun or damaged ammunition.

"We have sources in the army that say that it was only an incident, and that they thought they were attacking the Taliban, getting their information from U.S. troops," Przybylski told IPS.

The wives of two of the soldiers accused of war crimes have said the "suggestion" to open fire came from a U.S. command.

According to the Dec. 3 edition of Rzeczpospolita, the Polish soldiers were told by the base "the village needs to be f\*\*\*\*\* up," but claim they were still aiming at the nearby hills where they supposed the Taliban members were hiding. It is believed that Taliban members often come down from the hills and hide among the civilian population in villages, especially at night.

The prosecution says there is no proof indicating U.S. responsibility, but in Poland disillusionment with the U.S. is on the rise.

Roman Kuzniar, head of the strategic studies department at Warsaw University, says that while the Polish contingent in Afghanistan is part of NATO's peacekeeping mission, Polish troops have been made subordinate to U.S. troops, impairing the quality of the Polish mission.

"It was certain that our soldiers would soon adopt the methods of combat of their American superiors and colleagues. These methods involve ignoring completely all rights and limitations under international humanitarian law," Kuzniar wrote in the Nov. 21 edition of Warsaw Dziennik.

Recent statements by U.S. President George Bush have done little to improve Washington's image in Poland.

"Bush recently forgot to mention Polish troops when mentioning U.S. allies in Afghanistan," Przybylski told IPS. "For Poles it is especially important to be recognised as allies of the U.S."

Both the Iraqi and the Afghani missions are unpopular among Poles. The withdrawal from Iraq has been scheduled for 2008, but there are still no plans to reduce the 1,200-strong contingent in Afghanistan. But it could, however, be changed into one of a more civilian nature.

A poll conducted shortly after the prosecution announced its findings shows that the Afghani mission has almost equalled the Iraqi mission in unpopularity, with 85 percent of Poles opposing both missions.

Poles also overwhelmingly support an official apology to the Afghanistan government. Prime Minister Donald Tusk has made that conditional on the investigation's conclusions.

The villagers have been given medical assistance, food and money but for some the compensation is insufficient,

and could be interpreted as an attempt to buy their silence.

"One might get the impression that an attempt was made to cram these people's mouths shut with rice and rolls of banknotes," the Warsaw Dziennik wrote Nov. 15. "Real compensation should be paid out to the families of those killed and injured, rather than our resting satisfied by tossing scrap to them." (END/2007)

[Contact Us](#) | [About Us](#) | [Subscription](#) | [News in RSS](#) | [Email News](#) | [Mobile](#) | [Text Only](#)  
Copyright © 2007 IPS-Inter Press Service. All rights reserved.