

## Afghanistan War-Crimes Case Tests Poland's Commitment to Foreign Missions

WARSAW: Poland is facing a rare war-crimes prosecution at a crucial juncture for both the newly elected government's commitment to overseas military engagements and the effort to overhaul the nation's armed forces.

Seven Polish soldiers sit in a military jail in Poznan, accused of killing six Afghan civilians, including women and children, in the village of Nangarkhel in August. Whether the mortar rounds that killed the Afghans were a result of bad aim, bad orders or bad intentions remains to be determined.

The charges against the soldiers have led the country into uncharted legal, moral and political territory. The case has become a test of the public's stomach for sending soldiers into faraway battle in support of allies.

The issue is especially troubling to a country with a strong attachment to its military, a result of centuries of division and domination by foreign powers. Poland also tends to view itself as an underdog fighting on the side of right, typified by the mythic charge of Polish cavalry against Nazi tanks in World War II.

"We were convinced that our contribution was not only stable and militarily significant, but also that we stand for international law and humanitarian needs," said Bogdan Klich, the defense minister. "From that point of view, what happened in Afghanistan is a shock for Polish public opinion."

The timing is particularly difficult, he said, because "we are in the critical phase of reshaping our involvement in the military missions," including plans to withdraw from Iraq.

The headline on the cover of the Polish edition of Newsweek after the soldiers were arrested on Nov. 13 said bluntly, "Blood on the Uniform." On the cover of Polityka, a respected weekly newsmagazine, the larger question rang out: "Afghanistan: What Are We Doing There?"

The country has 1,200 soldiers in the NATO operation in Afghanistan. Poland has also been a significant ally for the United States in Iraq, and it still has 900 troops there. It has been a consistent contributor to international missions.

Western military experts have held up Poland as a success story among former Warsaw Pact countries that have joined NATO. The new government has also declared its intention to phase out conscription completely by 2010, as Poland continues its effort over many years to transform its army from a lumbering institution of the Communist era to a nimble modern force geared toward distant missions like Afghanistan and Iraq.

But the war in Iraq was unpopular with the Polish public even before the invasion in 2003. The opposition Civic Platform party ran in parliamentary elections this fall in part on the promise to bring troops home.

In his inaugural address last week, the new prime minister from that party, Donald Tusk, said Polish troops would be out of Iraq by the end of next year.

But Mr. Tusk renewed the country's commitment to keeping troops in Afghanistan. Public opinion is opposed to that mission as well, according to one recent survey here conducted for the newspaper Gazeta Polska.

"Our soldiers' blood being spilled is pointless," Agnieszka Kwiatkowska, 32, said, as she waited for a train at the main station in Poznan.

Wladyslaw Czysz, 80, a former soldier living in Poznan, said, "The ones who should be charged are those who arrested them." He was referring to newspaper photographs here showing the arrests of the soldiers by officers wearing ski masks, images that inflamed public opinion.

Many civilians here either say the soldiers are innocent, or at least give them the benefit of the doubt, saying that that the deaths were probably accidental.

The military prosecutor's office said that on the morning of the mortar attack, separate Polish and American patrols left a shared base. They were attacked with improvised explosive devices. Several hours later, another group of Polish soldiers was sent to reinforce the patrols that were waiting with their damaged vehicles. The reinforcements opened fire with their mortar, killing the civilians.

Up to this point there has been no suggestion of American involvement in the civilian deaths.

At first, the soldiers said they had been returning fire. But Lt. Col. Zbigniew Rzepa, on the prosecution team, said, "We already know that this is not true," although he did not explain why. The trial is unlikely to begin before February, and may start much later, Colonel Rzepa said.

The timing of the attack, two days after the first Polish soldier was killed in Afghanistan, fueled speculation in the news media that the killings may have been an act of revenge, though such suggestions have died down.


"Nobody thinks that this was an intentional act of vengeance by Polish soldiers," said Jacek Relewicz, the lawyer for one of the privates in custody.

Marek Sterlingow, a reporter for Gazeta Wyborcza, a leading daily newspaper, said, "I think that it is very unlikely that they did it on purpose." Mr. Sterlingow was at the base the day after the attack and has written several articles about it. "It is most likely that this was an accident, maybe an accident caused by a not-very-good tactic," he said.

He added, "I think that the Polish military got into such a bad situation because of the instinct of covering up."

Despite the controversy, the new government says it is committed to the Afghanistan mission. "We have to contribute to the missions of NATO," said Mr. Klich, the defense minister, "even in such an exotic place for Polish public opinion as Afghanistan."

End.

 [Click to Print](#)

*Site powered and maintained by [RMDG.org](http://RMDG.org) And [PakCyber.Com](http://PakCyber.Com)*