

Jere van Dyk analyses the shooting of Afghan civilians in their homes by a US Army soldier, apparently in Panjawaii (as it is spelled on the Afghan map), 15 miles southwest of Kandahar last month.

The city itself (once a quiet, romantic oasis of canals, palm trees and fruit stands piled high, but no longer), is small. But the whole area for miles around is a vast warren of baked, single-storey mud homes, and higher houses with holes in the sides, where they dry grapes.

In between there are small plots of land, some with trenches where they grow grapes, and there are groves of pomegranate trees, and villages filled with cousins, large clans and tribal loyalty.

A former soldier, Graeme Woods, who has worked in this region, wrote a rather condescending article in The New York Times explaining how primitive these homes are - in part, it seems, to help explain why the shooter might have felt like he was on another planet, going through his "umpteenth spacewalk," in this "Potemkin village."

While the US has characterized last month's massacre as an assault by a lone person, villagers said - and Karzai at least publicly seemed to agree - that they believed more than one shooter took part in the massacre. Karzai said the US Army was impeding the Afghans' investigation.

Now this gets interesting. The West will not believe the Afghans, only the Americans. But be careful.

In 2006, I went up into the mountains where Pat Tillman was killed. I took a video and still cameras, the US Army report (which Tillman's father gave me), and Afghan guides. I went over the terrain twice, in two trips, and read the report carefully. I interviewed every Afghan I could find who was there that day, separately, at different locations, never telling one that I was interviewing the other. Their stories, and the video, were different from the Army's report, especially if one includes what the US soldiers who were with Tillman said.

As Mary Tillman's book "Boots on the Ground by Dusk" and Jon Krakauer's book "Where Men Win Glory: The Odyssey of Pat Tillman" have shown, the US Army, including Gen. Stanley McChrystal, did not tell the truth, to put it mildly.

Bales probably acted alone, but there may be more to this.

One of the houses has four rooms, a big house. Adults sleep separately from the children, if possible. They, like any couple, want privacy. The father was away. The dirt floors are generally swept clean and can even shine. The families would have slept on narrow wood cots with crossed rope bottoms and thin mattresses, or they slept on thin cushions, on the ground, or on kilims or capets.

The shooter must have dragged them or carried them from their cots, if they slept on them, and put them all together in one room. Karzai said it wasn't possible. I don't know, but how could the soldier do this without worrying about other villagers coming? But then, maybe he didn't care. Would other villagers have cowered in their homes, afraid, or would some have come out?

Yes, Afghans lie, definitely, beautifully, extravagantly. But in my experience they also more often than not tell the truth. We will see.

In my view this case offers two possibilities regarding the villagers: (1) They do not like American soldiers, for so many of them to say that other soldiers were present, meaning that as a rule they are afraid of them; or (2) that they were ashamed over not responding as Afghan men, and thereby let one person massacre their neighbors.

In traditional Pashtun culture, in war one must protect women and children. It would have taken time, I would think, to move all the bodies, cover them and set them on fire.

In Islam, in Afghanistan, a body must be washed and cleaned when the person enters Paradise. Mohammad Atta washed himself before beginning his mission on 9/11. The bodies were burned, and thus desecrated. The assailant's act, to an Afghan, was thus beyond cruelty. Will those children now never be able to enter Paradise?

I have been told that the Taliban cut off heads (which they learned from al Qaeda) in part so that the victim cannot go to Paradise. The body is not whole.

We shall see how the mullahs react.
The United States has said we are sorry, but we have said it before, and what the New York Times called "missteps" continue.
Karzai said that he is at the end of his rope. I am sure he is angry and saddened, but he also is trying to stay alive. Almost all Afghan rulers since the 1970s have been murdered. He is trying to placate his people and to stay ahead of the Taliban in showing anger. If he cannot bring to Afghanistan justice - the central tenet of Islam - then the people may turn against him. He will be seen as even more impotent than he is.
In an interview for Kabul-based media company Tolo (a Tajik-owned firm), Defense Secretary Leon Panetta told Daud Sultanzoy, a former Afghan Parliamentarian that the gunman "will be brought to justice swiftly." Panetta referred to "the noble people of this country." General Allen also referred to "noble Afghans" in his apology aired on television after the Quran burnings - and again called them noble after this latest incident. They are appealing to the Afghans' sense of honor and dignity, but by the third time it rings of public relations.
Many news organizations reported on Karzai's angry comments, and included a quote from one villager: "I don't want a computer. I don't want money. I don't want a trip to Mecca. I don't want a house. I want nothing, But I absolutely want the punishment of the American. This is my demand, my demand, my demand."
Afghans have seen that demonstrations have gotten them little. But they will act, just as that interpreter, seemingly a Western ally, did when he grabbed the truck and tried to kill members of Panetta's welcoming party. They can be hot-headed, but mostly they are rational, and can be very cunning.
The Mujahideen fought for ten years, some of them longer, and the Taliban have now done the same. They, and countless Afghan villagers, who now have been through more than 33 years of war, are not going to buy talk of PTSD, or of three or four deployments.

****Analysis by CBS News Afghanistan consultant Jere van Dyk****