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Afghanistan has inaugurated its first new president in a decade, swearing in Ashraf Ghani to head a power-sharing government. Joining him on stage Monday was Abdul Rashid Dostum, Afghanistan's new vice president. Dostum is one of Afghanistan's most notorious warlords, once described by Ghani himself as a "known killer." Dostum's rise to the vice presidency comes despite his involvement in a 2001 massacre that killed up to 2,000 Taliban prisoners of war. The victims were allegedly shot to death or suffocated in sealed metal truck containers after they surrendered to Dostum and the U.S.-backed Northern Alliance. The dead prisoners — some of whom had been tortured — were then buried in the northern Afghan desert. Dostum, who was on the CIA payroll, has been widely accused of orchestrating the massacre and tampering with evidence of the mass killing. For more than a decade, human rights groups have called on the United States to conduct a full investigation into the massacre including the role of U.S. special forces and CIA operatives. We speak to Jamie Doran, director of the 2002 documentary "Afghan Massacre: The Convoy of Death," and Susannah Sirkin, director of international policy at Physicians for Human Rights, the group that discovered the site of the mass graves of the Taliban POWs.

## Transcript

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**AARON MATÉ:** We turn now to Afghanistan, which has inaugurated its first new president in a decade, swearing in Ashraf Ghani to head a power-sharing government. During his inaugural speech on Monday, the former World Bank executive called on militants to join peace talks.

**PRESIDENT ASHRAF GHANI:** [translated] We are tired of this war. Our message is a message of peace, and the message of peace doesn't mean we are weak. I call on Afghan government enemies, particularly the Taliban and Hezb-e Islami, to prepare for political negotiations.

**AARON MATÉ:** Afghanistan's new president, Ashraf Ghani, speaking Monday. Joining him on stage was Abdul Rashid Dostum, Afghanistan's new vice president. Dostum is one of Afghanistan's most notorious warlords, once described by Ghani himself as a, quote, "known killer." Dostum's rise to the vice presidency comes despite his involvement in a 2001 massacre that killed up to 2,000 Taliban POWs. The prisoners were allegedly shot to death or suffocated in sealed metal truck containers after they surrendered to Dostum and the U.S.-backed Northern Alliance. The dead prisoners, some of whom had been tortured, were then buried in the northern Afghanistan desert. Dostum, who was on the CIA payroll, has been widely accused of orchestrating the massacre and tampering with evidence of the mass killing.

**AMY GOODMAN:** For over a decade, human rights groups have called on the United States to conduct a full investigation into the massacre, including the role of U.S. special forces and CIA operatives. The Bush administration blocked three investigations into the alleged war crimes, and the Obama administration quietly closed its own inquiry last year without releasing its findings. After the massacre, Abdul Rashid Dostum left Afghanistan but returned in 2009 to help Hamid Karzai win re-election. Since then, he has served in a largely ceremonial role as commander-in-chief of the Afghan National Army.

We're joined now by two guests who have closely followed the story of the 2001 massacre as well as the rise of Dostum. Jamie Doran is with us, independent documentary filmmaker who directed the 2002 film, *Afghan Massacre: Convoy of Death*. In [2003](#), *Democracy Now!* became the first U.S. news outlet to air the film. He joins us by *Democracy Now!* video stream from England. And with us in Boston, Susannah Sirkin, director of international policy at Physicians for Human Rights, the group that discovered the site of the mass graves of the Taliban POWs.

Susannah, let's start with you. Talk about what happened back in 2001, why you're so deeply concerned about the new vice president of Afghanistan, Dostum.

**SUSANNAH SIRKIN:** Yes, well, a large group of fighters, mostly Taliban, surrendered to General Dostum's Northern Alliance, which was working as an ally of the United States at a time when indeed U.S. special forces, as you mentioned, were on the ground. And these surrendered prisoners were loaded like sardines into trucks, according to a lot of testimony and evidence that we have, and transported across the desert. Many of them suffocated, probably within days, because they were not given water. They were locked up in these, essentially, coffins, packed in. We have reports of gunshots being fired into the trucks, possibly to create air holes, but indeed the way in which they were fired indicates that they were fired straight into the trucks, so killing some of the surrendered prisoners. And then, reportedly, they were all brought across to this area now known as Dasht-e-Leili near the Sheberghan prison.

Physicians for Human Rights sort of came upon this site when we were visiting the horrific conditions—or, discovered the horrific conditions in Sheberghan, which is near the northern capital of Mazar-e-Sharif, the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif in Afghanistan. And we found that prisoners in Sheberghan were dying, dozens a day, for lack of food, illness, horrible sanitation. And we noticed that there were bodies on the surface, or remains, bones, etc. And within a month or two, under United Nations auspices, we did a mapping of this grave and went back and exhumed a number of bodies and indeed documented that the deaths were consistent with suffocation.

And it appears that U.S. forces were certainly cognizant of these deaths. We know this because Physicians for Human Rights actually filed a Freedom of Information Act query in 2006, and eventually we had to sue to get the information. And when it came out, we have reports from U.S. officials that indeed they knew that as many as 2,000 surrendered prisoners had died in this—what we call a "convoy of death," and also that witnesses were reportedly tortured and executed, eyewitnesses to these crimes. And we've been advocating for a full-out investigation by the international community and by the United States, and of course by the Afghan government itself, ever since. Now it's 12 years and counting, and we still do not know what really happened at Dasht-e-Leili.

**AARON MATÉ:** Well, can you lay out how these investigations have progressed, in terms of how this went down under the Bush administration, and then, when Obama took office, calling for an investigation, and then one concluding last year but not being made public?

**SUSANNAH SIRKIN:** Yes, well, Physicians for Human Rights and other human rights groups have repeatedly called for an independent investigation. And in 2008, when we uncovered evidence that there had been apparent tampering of the site, we were able to obtain satellite imagery that showed that the pieces of the site had actually been destroyed. And when that was

revealed by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Jim Risen in a front-page  
*New York Times*

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[story](#)

, CNN's Anderson Cooper asked President Obama if the U.S. government was finally going to investigate this apparent major war crime, and President Obama said, "If this has happened, we will certainly find out all the facts, and we must, if there are allegations of serious crimes in which our forces may have been involved, and certainly our allies." And I have to say that, since then, we have absolutely no evidence of any serious investigation conducted by the Obama administration.

What Jim Risen's *New York Times* piece also revealed is that, under the Bush administration, three separate federal investigations were basically shut down, and that includes  
FBI

agents on Guantánamo who were interviewing detainees who had been brought from Sheberghan prison to Guantánamo and who had started talking about this massacre. They were told not to pursue those queries any further and not to gather that information. And the war crimes ambassador at the State Department also wanted to go up to Dasht-e-Leili and was prevented from doing so. And the Senate investigation was also stopped. So, that was under Bush. And the president, the current president, has basically a year ago said, "We've completed an investigation, and we are satisfied that the U.S. was not involved." End of story, full stop, no transparency whatsoever.

**AMY GOODMAN:** In 2009, as you said, *New York Times* reporter [James Risen](#), who's now being prosecuted by the Obama administration for another story he broke, not wanting to give up a source on that—Risen spoke about his findings on  
*Democracy Now!*

**JAMES RISEN:** The evidence was overwhelming that something had happened and that it was the responsibility of the Bush administration to look into this or at least to push for an international investigation, because Dostum had been on the CIA payroll, was part of a U.S.-backed alliance that was taking over Afghanistan. And what I found was, time after time, in different agencies and as far—and in the White House, Bush administration officials repeatedly ignored evidence or just decided or discouraged efforts to open investigations into the massacre.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Soon after James Risen's report was published in *The New York Times* in 2009, CNN's Anderson Cooper asked President Obama about opening a new investigation.

**ANDERSON COOPER:** It now seems clear that the Bush administration resisted efforts to pursue investigations of an Afghan warlord named General Dostum, who was on the CIA payroll. It's now come out there were hundreds of Taliban prisoners under his care who got killed.

**PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA:** Right.

**ANDERSON COOPER:** Some were suffocated in a steel container. Others were shot, possibly buried in mass graves. Would you support—would you call for an investigation into possible war crimes in Afghanistan?

**PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA:** You know, the indications that this had not been properly investigated just recently was brought to my attention, so what I've asked my national security team to do is to collect the facts for me that are known, and we'll probably make a decision in terms of how to approach it once we have all the facts gathered up.

**ANDERSON COOPER:** But you wouldn't resist categorically an investigation.

**PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA:** I think that, you know, there are responsibilities that all nations have, even in war. And if it appears that our conduct in some way supported violations of the laws of war, then I think that we have to know about that.

**AMY GOODMAN:** That was President Obama on CNN in 2009, actually, interestingly, in Ghana. Jamie Doran, you have been following this story for well over a decade. What about President Obama's response and what's happened since? You were just recently in

Afghanistan. And your response to Dostum, the general, becoming the vice president of the country?

**JAMIE DORAN:** Yeah, well, I think it's kind of a picture of Afghan politics that you can have a man, as you said at the very beginning of your program, where the president, the new president, described him as a murderer and then appoints him as his vice president simply for pragmatism purposes to get 13 percent of the vote. Uzbeks represent 13 percent of the entire electorate. Dostum leads the Uzbeks. [Ashraf] Ghani needed Dostum by his side in order to win that election.

**AARON MATÉ:** Jamie Doran, when we had Jim Risen on our show, he was skeptical that U.S. special forces were involved in this massacre. What's your take on that?

**JAMIE DORAN:** Well, first of all, you probably don't know this, but I actually gave Jim Risen the FBI contacts that led to his story and his front-page news. So, you know, let's clear that up right away. And the FBI agent was in fact a man called Dell Spry, an extraordinary man, who reported his findings from Guantánamo to his bosses in Washington. He was told, "Don't"—you know, "Get away from that. Don't let us—don't continue investigations. Don't file any report." Dell refused to buckle, if you like, and insisted in filing yet another report, even under threat from his superiors.

I think it's been a great shame that Obama, we thought—you know, we understood Bush would want to hide as much as possible. We thought Obama might be a fresh broom. It's not been the case. He, too, has not got involved. He has not pushed it in any way. Dostum is now the vice president of the country. It's quite bizarre. You know, I don't know if you're aware that Dostum actually apologized for his war crimes last year in the run-up to the election—again, an example of pragmatism. He apologized, but wasn't specific. He just tried to give a kind of general apology for all the terrible things he had done. And the Afghan people seem to have bought that.

**AMY GOODMAN:** In 2011, Jamie, WikiLeaks published a classified cable from then-U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry about Dostum's return to Afghanistan. Eikenberry wrote in a 2009 cable, quote, "Dostum's return would endanger much of the progress made in Afghanistan over the past five years, create a source of friction in the Afghan government's relations with the international community, and could well cost Karzai's government the continued support of the United States and most of the international community." Your

response?

**JAMIE DORAN:** Well, you know, I'm still waiting for the massive protest from the White House or elsewhere over the fact that a murderer has been appointed vice president of Afghanistan. I mean, it really is that simple. It was fascinating during the election that [Ashraf] Ghani did not even bring a single photograph of Dostum when he went south to kind of to the Pashtun areas. And as everyone—if you go down there, everyone down there knows what Dostum did. Most of them, or many of them we've met, have relatives who were in that convoy and who died in the most horrific circumstances.

And one of the questions that, you know, doesn't seem to come up too often is: Why were they there for up to 10 days in those containers? And my information is: Because Americans on the ground demanded that every single person coming off the containers had to be identified to ensure that no Qaeda—no al-Qaeda slipped through. And so, these men were forced to stay in those containers for all those days in searing heat, suffocating, biting into each other's limbs to try and get fluid of any kind, because, as far as I've been told, the Americans needed to know the identity of every single person.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And this is where, at Sheberghan prison, is this right, that John Walker Lindh was discovered? Can you explain who he is and the significance of this?

**JAMIE DORAN:** Yeah, Sheberghan prison. No, well, what happened was that when that the thousands surrendered at Kunduz—I think it was 8,300 surrendered at Kunduz, a bunch of them—but 700 broke away and went to a place called Qala-i-Jangi, a fortress, which is actually controlled these days by Dostum, but went to Qala-i-Jangi, and they were held in Qala-i-Jangi. There was a revolt. Most of them were killed. American special forces, British special forces were involved in the fight. John Walker Lindh was one of the survivors of that attack. And it is quite fascinating that John Walker Lindh's private eye came to this very office to see me to ask whether or not, you know, I had come across Lindh, and had he been involved in any of the fighting, any of the trouble. Sure enough, he then showed me footage of where Lindh claimed to have been. And my cameraman was sitting beside me and said, "That's where they were shooting from." They were trying to prove that Lindh wasn't involved at all, when in fact he was directly involved, which is probably why he bought the 20 years.

**AMY GOODMAN:** We are going to break and then come back to this discussion and a clip of your film, Jamie, this remarkable film, *Afghan Massacre: The Convoy of*

*Death*

Sirkin of Physicians for Human Rights. This is

*Democracy Now!*

Back in a minute.

; also speaking with Susannah

[break]

**AMY GOODMAN:** This is *Democracy Now!*, [democracynow.org](http://democracynow.org), *The War and Peace Report*. I'm Amy Goodman, with Aaron Maté.

**AARON MATÉ:** Jamie Doran, I wanted to ask you—we're going to play a clip of your film, *Afghan Massacre: The Convoy of Death*. And can you set the scene for us, how you went about telling this story?

**JAMIE DORAN:** Well, I mean, it's funny. Just a few moments ago, you mentioned John Walker Lindh. The entire kind of press corps became fascinated by the American Taliban and literally ran to follow that story, when at the same time we had been told on the ground in Afghanistan that something very bad has happened, that some people had been tortured and maybe murdered at Sheberghan itself, which is why we ended up basically being the only journalists going in that direction, while everyone else was chasing Walker Lindh. And what we managed to do was get soldiers, first of all, to persuade soldiers, Afghan soldiers, who had been present throughout, to actually talk to us on camera and to tell us, including the one who admitted to shooting into the containers and killing prisoners—you know, they started to tell us the information. And literally, it was over a year investigation that we carried out in order to bring to the screen what we found.

**AMY GOODMAN:** We're going to turn right now, as we continue to talk about Afghanistan's new vice president, Abdul Rashid Dostum—his rise coming despite his involvement in the 2001 massacre that killed up to 2,000 Taliban POWs—we're turning to the excerpt of Jamie Doran's documentary, *Afghan Massacre: Convoy of Death*. Jamie traveled to the site of the massacres and the mass graves. The witnesses who testified in the film are unidentified, have their faces obscured, because they're afraid. But two of them are now dead. The clip begins with our guest, filmmaker Jamie Doran.



**JAMIE DORAN:** Originally loaded onto trucks at Kunduz, many of these men were crammed 200 to 300 at a time into the backs of sealed containers. After around 20 minutes, the prisoners began crying out for air.

**EYEWITNESS:** [translated] The weather was very hot. They put too many people inside the containers. Many died because there was no air.

**INTERVIEWER:** [translated] How many containers were at Qala-i-Jangi when you were there?

**EYEWITNESS:** [translated] The condition of them was very bad, because the prisoners couldn't breathe, so they shot into the containers, and some of them were killed.

**EYEWITNESS:** [translated] They told us to stop the trucks, and we came down. After that, they shot into the containers. Blood came pouring out of the containers. They were screaming inside.

**JAMIE DORAN:** One Afghan soldier admits that he personally murdered prisoners.

**AFGHAN SOLDIER:** [translated] I hit the containers with bullets to make holes for ventilation, and some of them were killed.

**JAMIE DORAN:** You specifically shot holes into the containers. Who gave you those orders?

**AFGHAN SOLDIER:** [translated] My commanders ordered me to hit the containers for ventilation, and because of that, some prisoners died.

**JAMIE DORAN:** But this was no humanitarian gesture. Rather than shooting into the roofs of the containers, the soldiers fired at random, killing those nearest the walls. A local taxi driver had called in at a petrol station on the road to Sheberghan.

**TAXI DRIVER:** [translated] I smelled something strange and asked the attendant where the smell was coming from. He said, "Look behind you." There were three trucks with containers fixed on them. Blood was running from the containers. My hair stood on end. It was horrific.

**JAMIE DORAN:** Whether or not the prisoners in the containers were ever really destined to reach Sheberghan must be open to question. The jail was full, and those already incarcerated were facing hardships of a different kind at the hands of American soldiers. They were reluctant to talk, particularly when the prison chiefs hovered close by, listening to our conversation. But one Taliban, who had been filmed during the surrender, was more forthcoming when we interviewed him out of earshot of the prison guards.

**TALIBAN MEMBER:** [translated] They were searching for bin Laden and questioning us about al-Qaeda. They were cruel. They took some of our men to Cuba, and they did a lot of things in here which scared us. The American commandos beat many of us to scare us into talking.

**JAMIE DORAN:** One of the Afghan officers, present at the time, confirms his story.

**AFGHAN OFFICER:** [translated] They cut their hair and beards, mainly the Arab prisoners. Sometimes they chose one for pleasure, took the prisoner outside, beat them and then returned them to the prison. But sometimes they were never returned, and they disappeared. The prisoner disappeared. I was a witness. They came after two or three days. They broke some

prisoners' necks and were beating others. They were crying, but everyone ignored them.

**JAMIE DORAN:** These things you saw specifically yourself?

**AFGHAN OFFICER:** [translated] Yes.

**JAMIE DORAN:** But for those prisoners crammed inside the containers, a quick death would have come as a blessing. Some of them remained for days in the desert before reaching Sheberghan. Accounts from survivors talk of licking the sweat off each other's bodies and even biting their fellow captives in a desperate effort to gain fluid in any form. The Pentagon has stated frequently that it knew nothing of the container convoy.

**WITNESS:** [translated] The Americans were in charge.

**INTERVIEWER:** [translated] Where were they? On the walls or near the gates of the fort?

**WITNESS:** [translated] They were standing at the front gates, where the prisoners were.

**TRUCK DRIVER:** [translated] When we got to Sheberghan prison, there were some Americans and some Afghan soldiers. They wanted to unload the trucks, and they were taking charge of the area.

**INTERVIEWER:** [translated] How many American soldiers were there?

**TRUCK DRIVER:** [translated] About 150 to 160. We didn't count the number.

**INTERVIEWER:** [translated] What were the Americans doing in the prison?

**TRUCK DRIVER:** [translated] They were there to make sure the prison was secure. There were so many Americans, and they were all armed and wearing their uniforms.

**JAMIE DORAN:** As the containers were opened, the full extent of the carnage became apparent. One soldier, who has since fled from Afghanistan, describes the scene in an interview with a Pakistani newspaper.

**AFGHAN SOLDIER:** [translated] I shall never forget the sensation as long as I live. It was the most revolting and most powerful stench you could ever imagine: a mixture of feces, urine, blood, vomit and rotting flesh. It was a smell to make you forget all other smells you ever experienced in your life.

**JAMIE DORAN:** For 10 days, the Red Cross tried to get access but were refused. They were told that they couldn't enter because American soldiers were working inside. And this picture taken at Sheberghan on December 1st, 2001, during the period when the containers were arriving at the prison, confirms their presence. Witnesses speak of U.S. soldiers searching the dead for identification before insisting that the Afghans remove the bodies from the prison. The Pentagon, however, will not comment.

**ROBERT FOX:** It was particularly important to find any identification on these bodies, because they were desperate for intelligence on al-Qaeda. They had underestimated the strength of al-Qaeda and its spread. They knew very little about it. So, human sensibilities did go out of the window.

**JAMIE DORAN:** The healthy captives were led into the prison and the dead packed into single containers. But many of the prisoners had not died. Some were so badly wounded they were thrown back into the containers with the dead. Others were simply unconscious following the journey to Sheberghan.

Using a small tourist camera to avoid detection, we traveled to the deserts of Dasht-e-Leili, just 10 minutes from the prison, with two drivers who agreed to show us where they were ordered to take the containers.

**TRUCK DRIVER:** [translated] Some of the Taliban were injured, and others were so weak they were unconscious. We brought them to this place, which is called Dasht-e-Leili, and they were shot there, there and over there.

**TRUCK DRIVER:** [translated] They took my truck and loaded a container onto it, and I carried prisoners from Qala-i-Jangi to Sheberghan, and after that, to Dasht-e-Leili, where there were shot by the soldiers. I made four trips backwards and forwards with the prisoners.

**JAMIE DORAN:** The mounds of sand show clearly where many of the bodies lie. Human bones and a few pieces of clothing with Pakistani labels are all that remain of those buried near the top of the piles.

**INTERVIEWER:** [translated] How many people were you carrying?

**TRUCK DRIVER:** [translated] About 140 to 150 each time.

**INTERVIEWER:** [translated] Did you bring them here?

**TRUCK DRIVER:** [translated] Yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** [translated] What was done with these people?

**TRUCK DRIVER:** [translated] They were brought here and shot.

**INTERVIEWER:** [translated] They were alive?

**TRUCK DRIVER:** [translated] Some of them were alive. Some of these were injured, and the rest were unconscious.

**INTERVIEWER:** [translated] When you brought the prisoners here, were there any American soldiers with you?

**TRUCK DRIVER:** [translated] Yes, they were with us.

**INTERVIEWER:** [translated] Here, at this spot?

**TRUCK DRIVER:** [translated] Yes, here.

**INTERVIEWER:** [translated] How many American soldiers were with you?

**TRUCK DRIVER:** [translated] Lots of them. Maybe 30 to 40. They came with us the first two times, but I didn't see them on the last two trips.

**JAMIE DORAN:** If American soldiers were involved in covering up their role at Sheberghan prison, it would border on war crimes. If they stood by as the summary execution of prisoners took place, when they could have intervened, this would be positively criminal. But could the United States argue they were not in a responsible position?

**ROBERT FOX:** They would not have taken orders from Afghans. They would have been in charge of security there; therefore, it is an American command, therefore it is ultimately an American responsibility for whatever went on under the eyes of those American soldiers.

**ANDREW McENTEE:** It's quite clear that because you have film evidence of a mass grave, people confessing, that the relevant authorities, be they American, Afghani or international, must carry out an investigation. You have identified the site of a mass grave. You've identified bodies in those graves. And it's quite clear again that pathologists, forensic pathologists, exhuming the bodies, could identify the cause of death and, I think, very importantly, could identify who these people are, because their families have the right to know. They have been disappeared involuntarily after being murdered.

**AMY GOODMAN:** An excerpt of Jamie Doran's film, *Afghan Massacre: The Convoy of Death*, the film looking at how Afghan warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum orchestrated the killing of up to 2,000 Taliban POWs in 2001. Dostum was sworn in as Afghanistan's new vice president yesterday. Jamie Doran, in this minute that we have left, what does this mean for the future of Afghanistan and the Afghan relationship with the United States? Today, the new president, Ashraf Ghani, is signing the bilateral security agreement with the U.S., which will keep up to 10,000 U.S. soldiers there, something Hamid Karzai wasn't willing to sign.

**JAMIE DORAN:** Well, again, Dostum is quite a divisive character. The reason that [Ashraf] Ghani wanted him on board was largely the Uzbek vote, but also his representation, if you like, in the north. [Ashraf] Ghani is well known amongst the Pashtun population. He needs to carry the north with him if they're going to keep Afghanistan together and keep the battle against the Taliban going. So, in that way, you know, he had very, very little choice. The real power in northern Afghanistan is not him. It's not even Abdullah Abdullah. It's another man entirely. But Dostum is, if you like, a middleman to them who can actually keep it together. But it's, frankly, a shocking state of affairs when a man who has been accused of being a murderer by his own president is now the vice president. That's beyond my understanding.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Jamie Doran, we want to thank you for being with us, independent documentary filmmaker. We'll link to our [broadcast](#) of the film, *Afghan Massacre: The Convoy of Death*

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