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Australian government accuses Russia of war crimes, buries its own atrocities in Afghanistan

Over the past week, Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne has accused Russia of war crimes in Ukraine on at least two occasions. Payne has not raised this charge as an allegation that must be investigated, but as a statement of fact.



Foreign Minister Marise Payne [Credit: Australian National University]

Her comments underscore the extent to which the Australian political establishment is marching in lockstep with the US administration of President Joseph Biden. Payne's declarations came immediately after Biden told a reporter that Russian President Vladimir Putin is a war criminal.

As the WSWS noted in a perspective responding to Biden's remarks:

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“The accusation tossed off by Biden is among the gravest possible. Raised against the president of a country, the charge encompasses not simply culpability for acts of criminality during the conduct of the conflict, but rather the far greater crime of launching a war of aggression, a crime against peace. The launching of such a war is the ultimate cause of all ensuing bloodshed and war crimes.”

Payne made no greater effort than Biden to substantiate her charge against Russia. During an Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) radio interview on Thursday, she merely stated: “The intentional targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure is a war crime.” Payne listed, in the most general terms, instances in which this had purportedly occurred in Ukraine.

Labor’s shadow foreign affairs minister Penny Wong has not made direct statements on the matter of Russian war crimes this week, but has made similar comments since the invasion of Ukraine.

On March 10, Wong declared: “Russia is bombing women and children.” This was part of an “illegal and immoral war waged against innocent people—all countries should condemn President Putin’s actions and support Ukraine’s sovereignty.”

All these statements are aimed at deepening the tensions with Russia and preventing any diplomatic resolution to the crisis. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has invoked Biden’s allegation of Russian war crimes to demand that Putin be banned from the G20 meeting in Indonesia later this year.

This is part of a broader war campaign. The US provoked Putin’s reactionary invasion by overseeing a decades-long eastward expansion of NATO, and by transforming Ukraine into a garrison state on Russia’s border. Now, it is exploiting the conflict to intensify longstanding plans for war against Russia, aimed at ensuring the hegemony of American imperialism over the Eurasian landmass.

Australia is involved in these efforts, including through the provision of more than \$100 million of weaponry to the right-wing, US-backed Ukrainian regime. Australia is playing a key political role, echoing every provocative statement made by Biden, and using the conflict in Ukraine to ratchet-up pressure on China, which is also in the US crosshairs.

As with Biden's declaration that Putin is a war criminal, the most striking aspect of the statements from Wong and Payne is their staggering hypocrisy.

Australia has joined every military intervention launched by the United States since the end of the World War II, from the bombing of Korea in the 1950s, through the rape of Vietnam to the neo-colonial invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and everything between those illegal wars. Millions were killed in these operations, waged for profits, markets, resources and geo-strategic dominance.

These are hardly distant questions of history. As they denounce alleged Russian war crimes, the Liberal-National government, Labor and the entire political establishment are engaged in an ongoing cover-up of Australia war crimes in Afghanistan.

In an interview with the *Australian* published this morning, Russian envoy to Canberra Alexey Pavlovsky noted Australia's role in the illegal invasion of Iraq, a war "based on false pretexts" that "destroyed a sovereign country." Pavlovsky added: "As to the Australian politicians supporting these baseless allegations made by the US, I'm a little bit surprised with the record the ADF [Australian Defence Force] have in Afghanistan."

Atrocities were undoubtedly committed throughout the two-decade occupation of Afghanistan by the US and its allies, including Australia. They flowed from the character of the war, as a neo-colonial operation directed at the subjugation of an entire population.

Pavlovsky was referencing specific, well-documented and corroborated war crimes by Australian troops. They all occurred under a Labor government, between 2009 and 2013. Many of the killings occurred as a result of the Gillard Labor government's support for a major troop "surge" by the Obama administration. Australian forces were involved in US-led "kill and capture" raids, purportedly targeting Taliban representatives and others fighting against the US occupation.

For years, the war crimes, while discussed within military and government circles, were publicly denied and covered up. In June 2019, the Sydney headquarters of the ABC were raided by the Australian Federal Police over stories exposing details of the killings. One of the ABC journalists, Dan Oakes, was threatened with charges under national security laws.

The Coalition government, with Labor's full support, is continuing with the prosecution of David McBride, a former army lawyer and the source of some of the revelations.

In 2016, the ADF and the government commenced a secretive, in-house review of the allegations. Its heavily-redacted findings were published in the Brereton Report, released in 2020.

The report found evidence of at least 39 murders of Afghan civilians and prisoners by 25 ADF personnel in special forces regiments.

The inquiry established that special forces troops routinely killed people, and then placed a "throwdown" radio or gun next to their corpse to legitimise the murder. Senior troops engaged in "blooding," whereby they supervised a younger soldier murdering a detainee. ADF troops "inflicted severe pain" on Afghan captives, indicating the use of torture. One episode, though not elaborated, was described as "possibly the most disgraceful episode in Australia's military history."

The report was a continuation of the cover-up, absolving the military command and governments of any knowledge of the crimes or responsibility for them.

Other evidence has indicated that the war crimes were far more extensive than those documented in the Brereton Report. Figures provided to the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission by civilians in Uruzgan Province, when it was primarily occupied by Australian troops, indicate a far higher death toll. The commission received 38 claims of killings and abuse, with a total of 122 killed, including 28 women and children, and 40 injured.

An earlier in-house Australian inquiry into the war crimes, moreover, had received reports that after Australian troops entered occupied villages on a number of occasions, many of the male inhabitants, including boys would be found with their throats slashed.

The government and Labor responded to the findings of the Brereton Report with hand-wringing, and vague statements about a "dark day" for the military. Their primary concern was that no one be held to account, and that the atrocities not hinder the ability of the ADF to participate in future wars, including the stepped-up US preparations for conflict with China.

In December 2020, when a mid-ranking Chinese official tweeted a condemnation of the war crimes, he was met with a firestorm of condemnation. Prime Minister Morrison, together with Labor leader Anthony Albanese and the entire corporate media, denounced the social media post as “offensive.” This was a signal for the issue of the war crimes to be dropped from most public discussion.

While the Brereton Report recommended prosecutions, there is no indication that any are planned. The handful of media reports over the past two years on the activities of a federal task force supposedly investigating the prospect of charges, have reported that “little progress” has been made.

This is all the more extraordinary, given that one killing was captured on video and has repeatedly been aired on national television. It shows an Australian soldier executing a prone and unarmed Afghan youth.



Australian Special Air Service (SAS) soldier murdering unarmed Afghan civilian [Screenshot from video leaked to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in March 2020]

The record demonstrates the utter hypocrisy of the Australian allegations against Russia. Workers and young people must reject the official attempts to cultivate a militarist, wartime atmosphere, and turn instead to the construction of an international anti-war movement, based on a socialist program. One aim of such a movement must be to bring the war criminals, above all in Washington, London and Canberra, to justice.

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