

U.S. soldier appears in court over massacre of 16 Afghan villagers

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A US soldier accused of killing 16 Afghan villagers was due in court Monday for the first time since the massacre, as his wife proclaimed his innocence and said he had no recollection of having committed the crime.

Staff Sergeant Robert Bales is expected to attend the Article 32 hearing, scheduled from November 5 to 16, at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in the western state of Washington, to determine if he should face a full court martial.

Relatives of the victims and witnesses are expected to testify via videolink from southern Afghanistan, where the massacre took place in March, his lawyer was quoted as saying.

Bales, 39, is accused of leaving his base in the Panjwayi district of Kandahar province on the night of March 11 to commit the killings, which included nine children. He allegedly set several of their bodies on fire.

The killings are thought to be the deadliest crime by a US soldier during the decade-long conflict and tested Washington and Kabul's already tense relationship to the limit.

On the eve of the hearing, Bales' wife reiterated her belief that he was innocent, saying that he did not remember the shootings and said he was shocked when he was told details of the allegations against him.

"My husband did not do this. Did not do this," Kari Bales told ABC News, adding: "I truly believe from the bottom of my heart that my husband is not involved."

She said she learned of the attack within hours, from military officials.

"It must have been a mistake, is how I initially took it... It was just incomprehensible to me. I know my husband. I know him very well, and especially the talk about the women and the children," she said.

Her husband was allowed to call her at midnight that same day, and was shocked when she told him what she had been told.

"He was like, 'What? What you talking about?'... And I was actually the one that had told him how many people had died, and that included women and children, and he was blown away," she told the broadcaster.

Bales was transferred from Afghanistan back to Fort Leavenworth in Kansas shortly after the massacre, before being moved back to Fort Lewis-McChord recently, home base of the US 2nd Battalion, 3rd Infantry Regiment.

His wife and two children were moved to the sprawling military base south of Seattle for their own

security, and to shield them from the glare of the media in the wake of the killings.

Bales' Seattle-based lawyer, John Browne, said more than 10 Afghans could be called to testify, adding that some witnesses have been "difficult to round up," according to the Seattle Times.

Browne was expected to travel to Afghanistan to question the witnesses for himself, while other staff from his law office would remain at the proceedings in Fort Lewis-McChord, the newspaper reported.

Browne, like Bales's wife, has said that his client cannot remember anything of the killings. Reports suggest he may have been drinking before the massacre, and been traumatized over the serious combat injury to a fellow soldier.

Relatives and victims have been paid tens of thousands of dollars in compensation following the shooting. Families of the dead got 2.3 million Afghanis (\$46,000) each while the injured received 500,000 Afghanis, Afghan officials said.

Bales — who prosecutors say returned to his base and turned himself in after the shooting rampage — is a decorated veteran who did three tours in Iraq before deploying to Afghanistan last December.

His wife said he was disappointed last year when he was passed over for promotion and a pay raise by the army.

She wrote about it in what appeared to be her blog's last entry, calling it a disappointment "after all the work Bob has done and all the sacrifices he has made for his love of his country, family and friends."

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<http://tinyurl.com/b6kbyws>

Jungle Drum Prose/Poetry. <http://jungledrum.lingama.net/news/story-216.html>