

US Assassination Program in Afghanistan -- A Total Disaster!

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A 'night raid' in Hakimabad in the heart of eastern Nangarhar province shows the face of U.S.-led presence in Afghanistan, and what it means to local people.



Mission accomplished -- another dead Taliban

Qari Mohammad Bashir heard his niece scream from his backyard a little before midnight on Oct. 27. Bashir, 33, a religious leader and shopkeeper in the remote Khogyani district farming town, grabbed a torch and ran outside.

"Don't move! We are ISAF (International Security Assistance Forces)," yelled a group of heavily armed men, who had scaled the compound's walls and rushed towards him.

Bashir say the foreign soldiers, accompanied by Afghan interpreters, ordered him and his brother to strip and kneel outside. They were handcuffed and blindfolded. "They were behaving in a harsh manner, pulling my beard and neck and asking me if I knew certain Taliban leaders, but we didn't know about them," he tells IPS.

The military conducted house-to-house searches in Hakimabad all night, rummaging through furniture and confiscating weapons that inhabitants in this insecure region traditionally store for self-defence. In some cases residents interviewed by IPS claim soldiers also took their money.

At one house 18-year-old high school student Zabihullah says his father, a logistician for a government infrastructure project, had been threatened earlier by Taliban to stop work. Zabihullah thought the Taliban were attacking when the soldiers blew their door in with explosives.

Neighbour Asif Amin, a lecturer at Nangarhar University's English Department in the provincial capital Jalalabad, says he was visiting home when his family compound was searched. "They made a mistake because these are very ordinary people. If the coalition forces sent them a request to come in for questioning they would have. They pay taxes and know the rules. This is why people can turn against them."

That dawn, ten males - including Bashir, Zabihullah and 16-year-old high school student Raees Khan

- were led blindfolded on foot to the district's army base, then flown by helicopter to the coalition's Forward Operating Base (FOB) Fenty in Jalalabad. Nine of them were held in small, solitary rooms and questioned over a one to three-day period about their daily activities before being released separately outside Fenty's main gate. They were each given 20 dollars for transport home.

Bashir alone was loaded blindfolded onto a military plane and flown to what he only guesses was Bagram airfield, a common destination for U.S.-led coalition detainees. There he was questioned repeatedly about his contacts before being returned to FOB Fenty and discharged days later.

"There was faulty intelligence," Bashir says. "We cannot ignore there are Taliban, but not all the people are Taliban. They just blast everything." After this experience he adds, "When a chopper is hovering the children get scared and say, 'they are coming to take you!'"

Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai addressed the national Loya Jirga in Kabul Nov. 16, calling for an end to night raids conducted by the U.S. and coalition Special Operations Forces as a condition for American military presence beyond 2014.

The U.S. embassy praised the proposal by the non-binding Loya Jirga - a national assembly of 2,000 participants handpicked by government officials - which affirms American military bases on Afghan soil for years to come.

A September study by the Open Society Foundation and Afghan NGO The Liaison Office suggests that military conduct has improved in finding targets, integrating Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), and reducing civilian casualties, abuse, and property destruction.

Despite these positives, the study warns insurgent attacks have not decreased and, "the dramatic increase in the number of night raids, and evidence that night raids or other operations may be more broadly targeting civilians to gather information and intelligence appear to have overwhelmed Afghan tolerance of the practice. Afghan attitudes towards night raids are as hostile as ever, even more so."

IPS has previously documented "well over" 1,500 civilian deaths based on analysis of official U.S. and NATO night raid statistics over a ten-month period in 2010-2011.

"I think they will continue with night raids as long as they see it as successful and think it reduces civilian casualties," Susanne Schmeidl, co-founder of The Liaison Office tells IPS.

"ISAF/NATO forces are moving towards a model of conducting all night raids with ANSF in the lead, and claim to be nearly there," adds Peyton Cooke, The Liaison Office's justice programme officer.

"US Special Operations Forces (operating with a degree of independence although technically under ISAF/NATO control) may or may not be moving towards this model as well," he says. "I am not aware of their offering any public commentary on the matter, but part of their mission is to work closely with, and mentor, Afghan forces. As such, Karzai's condition may turn out to be minimal - although, without fuller public information on U.S. SOF, that is unknowable."

In a reaction to the Loya Jirga, on Nov. 20 an estimated 1,000 Nangarhar University students angrily took to Jalalabad's streets demanding a stop to permanent U.S. military bases, night raids and foreign-run prisons.

Across town Rafiuddin, 36, still tries not to cry when he recounts the details surrounding the night

raid at his home in Koshkaky, in the province's Surkh Rod district, in May last year.

Just past midnight, coalition forces launched a surprise attack on the walls and roof of Rafiuddin's house. His startled watchman raised his gun and was shot first. Then his brother Hafizuddin was instantly killed by a bullet to the head.

Finally, Habibuddin, his 17-year old son, ran to rescue his uncle and was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade. He died a slow death in the garden where the family was held throughout the night. A farmer and four sons living on the property heard the chaos and rushed to help. They too were all shot. Ten civilians were killed that night.

Bound and questioned until the next morning, Rafiuddin found out the coalition forces were looking for Taliban fighters, and suspected one of the farmer's sons. Rafiuddin, a driver for an opposition parliamentary member, says three generations of the same farming family have lived on the land, and he was unaware of any Taliban involvement.

"I told the interpreter they had just killed all the people close to me. I said, 'Please tell them exactly what I am saying'." The interpreter replied, "False intelligence was given about your own house.... I feel sorry for you."

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