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Afghans tell of US soldier's killing rampage

By KATHY GANNON

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Sitting on a dirty straw mat on the parched ground of southern Afghanistan, Masooma sank deeper inside a giant black shawl. Hidden from view, her words burst forth as she told her side of what happened to her family sometime before dawn on March 11, 2012.

According to Masooma, an American soldier wearing a helmet equipped with a flashlight burst into her two-room mud home while everyone slept. He killed her husband, Dawood, punched her 7-year-old son and shoved a pistol into the mouth of his baby brother.

"We were asleep. He came in and he was shouting, saying something about Taliban, Taliban, and then he pulled my husband up. I screamed and screamed and said, 'We are not Taliban, we are not government. We are no one. Please don't hurt us,'" she said.

The soldier wasn't listening. He pointed his pistol at Masooma to quiet her and pushed her husband into the living room.

"My husband just looked back at me and said, 'I will be back.'" Seconds later she heard gunshots, she recalled, her voice cracking as she was momentarily unable to speak. Her husband was dead.

Masooma, who like many Afghans uses only one name, defied tribal traditions that prohibit women from speaking to strangers to talk to The Associated Press while — half a world away — the military prepares to court-martial a U.S. serviceman in the killing of her husband and 15 other Afghan civilians, mainly women and children.

The AP also interviewed other villagers about the case, all of whom are identified by the U.S. Army as witnesses or relatives of witnesses. They included a sister and brother who were wounded and two men who were away during the killings and returned to find wives and children slain. The sister and brother told AP how they tried to run away and hide from a soldier with a gun, only to be shot — and see their neighbors and grandmother killed.

U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Robert Bales of Lake Tapps, Washington, is accused of the killings. Prosecutors say Bales slipped away from his remote outpost to attack two nearby villages, returning in the middle of the rampage and then for a final time soaked in blood. During a hearing last fall, other soldiers testified that Bales spent the evening before the massacre watching a movie about revenge killings, sharing contraband whiskey from a plastic bottle and discussing an attack that cost one of their comrades his leg.

Bales has not entered a plea, but his lawyers have not disputed his involvement in the killings. They have said his mental health may be part of his defense; he was on his fourth combat deployment and had suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder as well as a concussive head injury while serving in Iraq. The Army is seeking the death penalty.

The killings took place in Kandahar's Panjwai district, deep in the ethnic Pashtun heartland that spawned the Taliban movement, an area where women are hidden inside all-enveloping burqas and rarely leave their homes.

Masooma's account of the night has been reported variously over the past year, differing over details such as whether there was one or more than one U.S. soldier involved. However, the four hours she recently spent with the AP was her first face-to-face interview with a news organization. She spoke as her burly brother-in-law Baraan loomed nearby.

The interview took place outside Baraan's single-story mud home in Kandahar city, because Alokzai and Najiban villages, where the killings occurred, are too hostile for foreigners to visit. Even in Kandahar, some 150 kilometers (90 miles) away, the AP journalists sought to avoid being seen by Baraan's neighbors, who he feared would react negatively to their presence.

Masooma said that the soldier returned to the family's bedroom after killing her husband. She stood in terror. Her children hid under their blankets. The soldier moved slowly and seemed angry. Gesturing to show how he hit her in the arms and shoved her to the ground, Masooma said he then moved toward her son Hikmatullah, then 7.

Her son said he remembers the sight of the attacker in full military uniform. "I was so afraid. I pretended I was asleep," he said.

Masooma said the soldier found Hikmatullah and punched him repeatedly in the head.

She said the soldier then found her 2-year-old daughter, Shahara. He grabbed her pigtailed and violently shook her head back and forth.

He then went to the crying baby Hazratullah and shoved the muzzle of his black pistol into the infant's mouth, she said.

"He just held it there in his mouth. I screamed and screamed, 'He is just a baby. Don't kill him. Don't kill him.' But he just kept the gun in his mouth. He didn't say anything. He just stared at him," she recalled. As she recounted the attack, Hazratullah fussed and squirmed beneath the giant shawl that enveloped her.

After some time, she said, the soldier took the gun from the baby's mouth and walked back into the living room. Masooma dug her bare foot into the dirt to demonstrate how the soldier slipped his foot beneath her husband's head to lift it from the floor, as if to be sure he was really dead. The soldier looked down at her husband, shrugged his shoulders and returned to searching her home. After he finished rifling through their belongings, he left.

Investigators say Bales was armed with a 9 mm pistol and an M-4 rifle outfitted with a grenade launcher when he walked off his base and went on a nighttime killing spree in five homes, including Masooma's. He faces 16 counts of premeditated murder; six counts of attempted murder; seven counts of assault; and one count each of possessing steroids, using steroids, destroying a laptop, burning bodies, and using alcohol. He is being held in a military prison at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, south of Seattle in Washington state.

On April 23, Bales appeared in a military courtroom at Joint Base Lewis-McChord for a hearing that focused on what might happen if he is convicted, including which relatives and friends could speak on his behalf during a sentencing hearing. Such testimony could help determine whether he receives the death penalty.

The U.S. government flew Baraan and five other Afghan men — all members of families who were attacked — to Seattle to familiarize them with the U.S. judicial system and notify them that they would likely have to return when the court-martial begins in September. Only three of those who went to the U.S. in March said they saw the attack. Some, like Baraan, went on behalf of relatives who were slain or women prevented from traveling.

None of the Afghan witnesses was able to identify Bales as the attacker, but other evidence, including tests of the blood on his clothes, implicated him, according to testimony from a DNA expert.

The AP also spoke with several others who survived the attack or lost family members. To avoid putting the Afghans in danger should they be seen talking to foreigners, the AP arranged for those interviews to take place at a nondescript hotel in Kandahar. The Afghans drove the dusty, dangerous road from their villages to the hotel and then returned home.

Said Jan, an elderly man who was visiting Kandahar during the attack and lost his wife and three other family members, said he went to the United States expecting justice.

"I thought we were going to America to see him hanged," Said Jan said. "Instead they showed us a courtroom and kept us in rooms asking us more and more questions."

Said Jan said he wasn't interested in returning for the trial.

"None of us will go," agreed Mohammed Wazir, who also went to the U.S. in March. "Why would we care about seeing America? We will only go if he is hanged."

Wazir said he returned home from a trip the morning after the attack to find 11 members of his family dead — his wife, his mother, two brothers, a 13-year-old nephew and his six children. Their bodies were partially burned.

He was left only with his 3-year-old son, Habib Shah, who had accompanied him on the trip to Spin Boldak, a town on the Pakistani border.

While Wazir spoke of the horror of finding his home spattered with blood, still smelling of burned flesh, Habib, now 4, played by his side, chewing on his toy police car, occasionally running it across his father's legs, loading small candies on the roof and giggling when they tumbled off.

"He misses his mother all the time," Wazir said, trying to straighten Habib's curly brown hair.

From another home that was attacked that night, 16-year-old Rafiullah remembers the American soldier smashing through the door waving his pistol. Awakened in a small room with his grandmother and his sister Zardana, he said he didn't know what to do. "We just ran and he ran after us."

Zardana, 11, said a cousin dashed over to help. He was shot and killed, she said. "We couldn't stop. We just wanted somewhere to hide. I was holding on to my grandmother and we ran to our neighbors." Their neighbor, Naim, came out of his house to see what the noise was all about and was shot and wounded. His daughter then ran to him but was killed by the American soldier, Zardana said, struggling to remember and fiddling with her green scarf decorated with tiny sequins.

Zardana, who said she saw soldiers in a nearby field as she ran from one house to the next, remembers trying to hide behind her grandmother at the neighbor's house. But the soldier found them.

Gesturing with his hand as if spraying the room with gunfire, Rafiullah said the soldier "just went bang, bang, bang."

Rafiullah was wounded in both his legs, his grandmother was killed and Zardana was shot in the head.

She removed her scarf to show where the wound had healed; the effects will last a lifetime. She suffered nerve damage on her left side and has to walk with a cane. Her hand is too weak to hold anything heavy.

Zardana spent about two months recovering at the Kandahar Air Base hospital and three more at a naval hospital in San Diego receiving rehabilitation therapy, accompanied by her father, Samiullah.

Listening as she spoke, Samiullah smiled at his lanky daughter, encouraging her to say the only English phrase she knows: "Thank you."

Zardana spoke of her treatment in San Diego and the doctors and nurses who helped her learn to walk again, gave her toys and still find ways to stay in touch.

"They showed me so much love," she said with a tiny smile. "They asked me about what happened and when I told them how my grandmother died and how afraid I was and how I was shot, they cried and cried."

The accounts of many villagers have varied over the past year, making it a challenge for investigators and journalists to find out a full narrative of the attack.

For example, Masooma gave an telephone interview to a reporter days after the attack, with Baraan, her brother-in-law, acting as a translator. According to the resulting story, she described a single attacker in her home, but said she saw many soldiers outside.

Three months later, her family allowed a female Army investigator to question her. The investigator testified at a hearing last fall that Masooma clearly stated two soldiers carried out the attack. The investigator said she had no reason to doubt Masooma's credibility.

At the same hearing, Baraan testified, insisting Masooma was mistaken when she said there were two soldiers. Lawyers for the soldier accused in the killings suggested Baraan might be influencing Masooma — especially since the defense was not allowed to speak with her.

No physical evidence has emerged to suggest more than one soldier took part in the killings. Surveillance footage from the base showed one soldier returning to the camp; the soldiers who greeted him said he was covered in blood.

Nevertheless, many Afghans villagers, including some eyewitnesses, continue to insist multiple soldiers were present during the attack.

In the interview with the AP, Masooma did not waver in her insistence that one soldier attacked her home, and Baraan denied that she ever reported seeing many soldiers outside. Masooma did recall flares lighting the sky until "night seemed like day" — which is consistent with testimony from the hearing, as guards said they fired a flare that illuminated the sky for 20 seconds after hearing gunshots. Masooma also said she heard helicopters overhead; there was no corroborating testimony at the hearing.

Masooma is absolutely certain of one thing: what it will take for her to find closure.

"I just want to see him killed," she said of Bales. "I want to see him dead. Then I can let go."