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## Kabul to Investigate Child Sex Slavery Fueling Insider Attacks

6/28/2016

Afghanistan's president has ordered a "thorough investigation" into institutionalized sexual abuse of children by police, after AFP revealed the Taliban are using child sex slaves to launch deadly insider attacks.

There has been international condemnation of paedophilic "bacha bazi" -- literally "boy play" -- which AFP found has been exploited by the Taliban to mount a series of Trojan Horse attacks over two years that have killed hundreds of policemen in the remote southern province of Uruzgan.

"The president has ordered a thorough investigation (in Uruzgan) and immediate action based on findings of the investigation," the presidential palace said of Ashraf Ghani in a statement.

"Anyone, regardless of rank within the forces, found guilty will be prosecuted and punished in accordance and in full compliance of the Afghan laws and our international obligations," the English language statement said.

The ancient custom of bacha bazi, one of the country's worst human rights violations, sees young boys -- sometimes dressed as women -- recruited to police outposts for sexual companionship and to bear arms.

It is deeply entrenched in Uruzgan, where police commanders, judges, government officials and survivors of such attacks told AFP that the Taliban are recruiting bacha bazi victims to attack their abusers.

The claims -- strongly denied by the Taliban -- expose child abuse by both parties in Afghanistan's worsening conflict.

The presidential statement said there was "no place" in the Afghan establishment for abusers, adding it will do "whatever it takes" to punish them.

### **'Horrific'**

The announcement follows a flurry of international reaction to AFP's report.

"We strongly condemn any abuses of the horrific nature described in the article," the US embassy in Kabul said.

"We urge the Afghan government... to protect and support victims and their families, while also strongly encouraging justice and accountability under Afghan law for offenders."

In a letter last week to US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, Congressman Duncan Hunter demanded a proactive American role to end bacha bazi in Afghan forces.

"I remain concerned... that the Taliban is increasing its use of children to access security positions and mount insider attacks against... Afghan police," Hunter said in the letter seen by AFP.

"It is my belief that we can begin taking immediate steps to stop child rape from occurring in the presence of US forces and reduce any risk of coinciding insider attacks. This includes imposing a zero-tolerance policy."

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) said bacha bazi is of "high concern" for the international community.

"UNAMA continues to receive anecdotal reports of bacha bazi, including within Afghan security forces, and continues its engagement with government to ensure the criminalization and prevention of all forms of exploitation and abuse of children," Mark Bowden, the UN deputy special representative for Afghanistan, told AFP.

The Afghan government announcement, which did not specify a timeframe for the investigation, comes ahead of two crucial donor conferences on Afghanistan in Warsaw and Brussels this year.

The war-battered country remains heavily dependent on international financial and military assistance, which helps sustain security forces -- including police.

**'Morally reprehensible'**

Any perception of apathy about bacha bazi risks jeopardising that assistance, said Michael Kugelman, an analyst at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington.

"No donor in good conscience can justify funding police forces that engage in such reprehensible practices," Kugelman told AFP.

"There's already much talk of donor fatigue, but as donors hear more about bacha bazi, there's bound to be donor fear as well — fear of bankrolling institutions that do morally reprehensible things."

The Afghan interior ministry has said it is committed to institutional reforms, while acknowledging that bacha bazi within police ranks is a "serious crime".

The government last year launched a probe into sexual abuse and the illegal recruitment of child conscripts around Afghanistan.

But the country has yet to pass legislation criminalising bacha bazi and no initiatives have been publicly announced to rescue any children enslaved by police.

"The absence of any initiatives to release and recover children from their abusers is a serious failure on the part of Afghan authorities," Charu Lata Hogg, an associate fellow at London-based Chatham House think tank, told AFP, adding that donors must pressure Kabul for change.

"Abuse of children cannot be passed off as cultural practice."