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European Languages

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Times Online

Afghan family killed as special forces defy night raid ban

3/14/2010

THE two helicopters swooped low over a cluster of mud homes, whirling in the cold night sky before landing in a wheat field on the edge of the small Afghan village.

From his home nearby, 23-year-old Najibullah Omar strained his eyes in the darkness as he made out the faint shapes of armed men pouring from the helicopters' bellies.

A third helicopter circled menacingly in the moonless sky above the village of Karakhil in Wardak province, southwest of Kabul.

Then a loud explosion shook the ground and a plume of smoke rose from his cousin Hamidullah's house 20 yards away. Its guest room caught fire. Omar heard a burst of gunfire before all went quiet.

His worst fears were confirmed the moment he walked through the compound gate at first light.

The body of his cousin, a 32-year-old construction engineer who had taken a break from his job in a far-off province to visit his family, lay sprawled next to those of his wife and their seven-year-old son. Blood ran in dark pools on the mud floor of the terrace outside their door.

The wife and son had been shot in the head, each with a single bullet. The engineer had died from a shot to the chest. The precision of the killings, coupled with his failure to find any bullet casings after the raid, led Omar to believe that his cousin was murdered either by US special forces or by an intelligence agency.

The sole survivor was the couple's younger son, aged six, whose upper torso was riddled with puncture wounds from grenade shrapnel.

Some of the villagers dug away the fallen wooden beams, revealing the charred corpses of three Taliban fighters — a mid-level commander and two bodyguards, apparently killed where they slept by a missile from the circling helicopter.

“The Taliban often force themselves into our homes. What can we do?” said Omar. “We’re afraid of them. It’s better to keep your house and shelter the Taliban when they demand it than to lose your home.”

Last week General Stanley McChrystal, the commander of Nato troops in Afghanistan, responded to President Hamid Karzai’s call for a ban on night raids by publicly ordering his troops to curb their use.

The general’s order aims to end the killing and detention of innocent civilians during night operations. According to the United Nations, 98 civilians were killed in such raids last year, provoking widespread outrage. They are believed to have swollen the ranks of the Taliban, who score an easy propaganda victory every time Nato kills a civilian.

In his order, first issued confidentially to officers in January, McChrystal wrote that violating Afghans’ homes made it more difficult to win vital public support.

The new policy has created tensions with officers commanding special forces units, who often launch night operations without informing Nato commanders.

McChrystal has tried to rein in the independently run special forces units blamed for many of the civilian casualties in night raids.

“They are used as a blunt tool to kill insurgents, so they don’t do McChrystal’s brand of counterinsurgency very well,” said one source close to the Nato command. “The [special forces] are not designed for a touchy-feely counterinsurgency.”

Intelligence agencies such as the CIA fall outside the control of the military. Human rights activists point to a lack of accountability currently enjoyed by the CIA, whose role in Afghanistan involves commanding militias that conduct some of the raids.

In February, a mixed force of Afghans and Americans raided the home of Rahmatullah Sediqi, a 61-year-old shopkeeper, in Ghazni province in the east of the country.

The previous evening, seven Taliban fighters carrying rocket-propelled grenades, heavy machineguns and Kalashnikov assault rifles had entered the village and demanded shelter from Rahmatullah.

The helicopter-borne force that stormed his home triggered a fire-fight that left his wife and son dead.

“We can’t refuse the Taliban shelter,” said 42-year-old Mohammad Sediqi, Rahmatullah’s nephew. “My other brother is so angry that he is considering joining the Taliban to take revenge.”

During a US- and UK-led offensive in Helmand province last month, errant Nato missiles and strikes killed as many as 28 civilians in the first two weeks.

Although McChrystal’s directive seeks to address these problems, doubt remains about how widely it will be heeded. “Intelligence and [special forces] are the ones primarily conducting

these raids, so if they don't adhere to the rules then there's no point at all in the rules," said Erica Gaston, a human rights lawyer.

30 die in Kandahar suicide bomb attacks

Taliban suicide bombers struck across Afghanistan's southern city of Kandahar last night, killing 30 people and wounding at least 50 in a series of strikes that militants said was a message to Nato.

Bombers attacked the prison and the police station and also set off two secondary blasts as a diversionary tactic.

The biggest attack was on the prison on the city's outskirts, apparently an attempt to repeat a jailbreak there two years ago in which a truck bomb was used to blast down the walls; 1,000 prisoners were freed, 400 of them Taliban. This time, following reinforcement by Canadian troops, the raid failed to achieve its objective and no one escaped. The city, the second largest in Afghanistan, is at the centre of the Taliban heartland and the next target for Nato forces this year.

The majority of the 30,000 additional combat forces ordered to Afghanistan by President Barack Obama at the end of last year are expected to be deployed in Kandahar as part of the operation over the next few months. Thousands of Canadian troops also patrol the city.

Many of last night's victims were women and children at a wedding hall near the police headquarters. Several buildings in the city collapsed with the force of the blast.