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The Independent

## Nato urged to investigate Afghan 'war criminal' employed by US

By Julius Cavendish in Kabul

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The head of Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission has urged Hamid Karzai's government and Nato to investigate allegations, first reported in *The Independent*, that an Afghan strongman employed by United States Army Special Forces embarked on a spate of war crimes, including rape, the summary execution of children, and torture. "We call on Special Forces – indeed, any forces – and the Afghan government to conduct an investigation of these allegations and find out if [the allegations are] correct or not," said Nader Nadery, who heads the Human Rights Commission.

He said the commission would make its own efforts to verify the claims against Commander Azizullah, the leader of a US-sponsored militia in the south-eastern Paktika province, but that "it is a core responsibility of the government of Afghanistan to launch an investigation... this is the only way to build confidence in [the country's security] forces".

A spokesman in Mr Karzai's office said it had asked officials to look into the allegations against Commander Azizullah and decide whether they merit a government inquiry. The spokesman said there would be no further comment for the time being.

Officials have been similarly reluctant to speak out about three photographs published on Monday showing US soldiers posing with the bodies Afghan civilians they're alleged to have

killed for sport. Nato and security consultants believe that the images are likely to spark public outrage as they are disseminated across Afghanistan.

With an announcement yesterday by Mr Karzai that Afghan soldiers and police would take control of two provinces and four cities from Nato this summer, there may have been little desire to cloud the moment with calls for war crimes investigations.

Last week, The Independent published claims made by a number of independent witnesses – and backed up by several leaked reports including two drafted by UN officials – that Commander Azizullah had exploited his patronage by US Special Forces to wage a campaign of violence against civilians he suspected of sympathising with, or harbouring, the Taliban.

Although a Nato spokesman said the coalition had looked into the allegations last year and found nothing, human rights experts say the security force is too often willing to brush aside claims of rights abuses. "As often as I've heard Isaf [Nato's mission in Afghanistan] officials say they take accountability seriously, I've heard them describe commanders with serious credibility concerns as 'Afghan good enough'," said Erica Gaston, a human rights lawyer with the Open Society Foundations. "When it comes to scrutinising commanders who are 'getting the job done' in their view, I think often they [Isaf] hear what they want to hear."

Several other Western observers of the Afghan war joined Mr Nadery in his call for an investigation. "The US should suspend its engagement with Azizullah while it conducts a thorough and transparent investigation into these allegations," said Rachel Reid, an analyst with Human Rights Watch.

"The US should sever ties with any armed groups against whom there are credible allegations of serious human rights violations, including contractors and those that the US gives weapons, training or mentoring to."

Thomas Ruttig, co-director of the think-tank Afghanistan Analysts Network, said Nato and the US must launch "a transparent investigation" into the allegations. "But how to get transparency into forces which are designed to operate covertly?" he asked.

Commander Azizullah's relationship with US Special Forces began in 2001 when he was hired as a mercenary to protect a Special Forces base in Paktika, and by 2007 he had become a commander of some sway. Battlefield reporting published by WikiLeaks noted that he acted with a degree of autonomy, contradicting his own claims.