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Afghanistan issues arrest warrant for US officer

By Stephen Grey

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AN AFGHAN prosecutor has issued an arrest warrant for an American special forces commander over allegations that a police chief was murdered by a US-trained militia.

Brig Gen Ghulam Ranjbar, the chief military prosecutor in Kabul, has accused the US of creating an outlaw militia which allegedly shot dead Matiullah Qateh, the chief of police in the city of Kandahar.

The militia, which Brig Gen Ranjbar claimed is armed and trained by US special forces, also allegedly killed Kandahar's head of criminal investigations and two other officers when they attempted to free one of their members from a courthouse.

“We lost one of this country's best law enforcement officers for the [attempted] release of a mercenary,” said Brig Gen Ranjbar, interviewed for a film to be shown on Britain's Channel 4 News tonight.

He accused American officials of refusing to hand over evidence or to permit his investigators to interview the special forces commander, known to Afghans only as “John or Johnny”, who he alleges sanctioned the raid.

The warrant, which has been circulated to border posts and airports, is an embarrassment for the US military, which is facing growing criticism for links to militias controlled by warlords.

In Kandahar, the militias have been accused of murder, rape and extortion.

Brig Gen Ranjbar said an investigation found that the force that killed Qateh operated from Camp Gecko in the hills outside Kandahar, a base for US special forces and the CIA.

Officials in Kandahar said the militia supplied guards and was trained to work alongside special forces and intelligence officials in raids against Taliban targets.

“If you go to Kandahar, people say these guys pretend to be interpreters but they carry out night raids and assassinations,” said Brig Gen Ranjbar. “We hear lots of strange and shocking stories.”

He claimed that suspects arrested for the courthouse raid had confessed to being part of a 300-strong militia unit run by “Johnny”. They said they “could not move a muscle and could not leave their base without Johnny’s orders”, Brig Gen Ranjbar said.

“He was the head of the group and they [the Americans] were the ones paying them.”

Col Wayne Shanks, a spokesman for the US military, denied that any US or other coalition forces were involved in the attack, and said those involved “were not acting on behalf of US or international forces”.

But according to the Afghan account, the militia known locally as the “Kandahar Strike Force”, or the “Kandahar Special Group”, arrived at the courthouse last June with US-supplied uniforms, vehicles and weapons. They demanded the release of a comrade held for a traffic offence. When police were called to the scene by terrified court officials, the militia opened fire, killing Qateh and three other policemen.

“The police chief took two steps forward and that’s when they fired,” claimed a witness, who showed Channel 4 the crime scene, pockmarked with bullet holes.

“Within a couple of seconds the chief was sprayed with bullets.”

The involvement of the Camp Gecko militia is politically sensitive because of its alleged close ties to Ahmed Wali Karzai, brother of Afghan president Hamid Karzai.

Militia members claim to have been recruited by associates of the president’s brother, who press reports have claimed is on the CIA payroll.

Interviewed by phone, Ahmed Wali Karzai called for an amnesty for the 41 men convicted of Qateh’s murder, but denied he had any militia connections.

Local militias have also been linked to a raid on November 10th last year when US and Afghan troops allegedly burst into the home of Janan Abdullah (23), riddled him with bullets and left his wife paralysed.

“Nothing was left undamaged, they shot at everything,” said one of his uncles. “He was just lying in bed. I’d say they fired 200 bullets at him.”

The family claimed it was Afghans who did the shooting and stole thousands of pounds in cash.

A US military spokesman said they had “no record” of the raid.

However, the family were given medical treatment at Camp Gecko.