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McClatchy

More Stryker Brigade soldiers charged with assault on Afghans

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Five soldiers from a Western Washington-based infantry brigade have been charged with aggravated assault for firing on three Afghan men, expanding the scope of the alleged crimes committed by a troubled group in Afghanistan's Kandahar province.

An Army official from Joint Base Lewis-McChord on Thursday confirmed the broad outlines of the assault charges. The formal charging documents have yet to be released and it is unclear when the alleged assault took place or if the Afghans were injured in the incident.

The newest charges follow charges filed earlier this year that accuse five brigade soldiers of killing three Afghan civilians in January, February and May of this year.

All together, the Army criminal investigation that began in May has resulted in more than 70 criminal charges filed against 12 soldiers.

The charges include allegations of illegal drug use, impeding investigations and of participation in an assault against a fellow soldier viewed as a drug informant.

The soldiers were part of the 5th Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division (since renamed the 2nd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division), which deployed to Afghanistan in July of 2009 and returned home a year later. The soldiers were based at Forward Operating Base Ramrod, a military installation in Kandahar Province, which has been a focal point of the U.S. and NATO campaign waged against Taliban fighters

The charges come at a time when NATO forces are also conducting a public-relations and economic-aid campaign intended to win the support of Afghans in the contested province.

As part that effort, NATO forces also have taken many measures to try to reduce civilian casualties.

Among those charged with aggravated assault against the three Afghan men are Staff Sgt. Calvin Gibbs, of Billings, Mont., and Spc. Michael Wagnon, of Las Vegas. Both are incarcerated and facing court-martials on separate murder charges.

Three other soldiers: Staff Sgt. Robert Stevens, of Portland, Sgt. Darren Jones, and Pvt. 1st Class Ashton Moore, of Severna Park, Md., also are accused of joining in the assault. These men are back at Lewis-McChord, but are not in the brig.

There are additional charges resulting from an early-May attack on a soldier who had reported that some members of his platoon were using drugs and alcohol in his room.

That soldier was kicked, choked, pummeled and spit upon by soldiers during the course of the beating.

Gibbs, one of the central figures alleged to have been involved in the unit's crimes, has denied any illegal actions. So has Wagnon