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TIME

## Victims' Families Denounce U.S. 'Kill Team'

By Jason Motlagh in Kandahar and Muhib Habibi

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Details of the gruesome crimes in Afghanistan that have resulted in 12 U.S. Army soldiers facing trial at a base near Seattle have been slowly making their way into the public domain. Dozens of photos to be introduced as evidence in the case allegedly show men from a self-styled "kill team" accused of murdering Afghan civilians for sport posing beside charred and mutilated bodies, from which fingers and a head were allegedly severed as trophies. One soldier, who was said to have boasted of similar killings in Iraq, allegedly added a skull tattoo to his left leg for each new victim. Another spoke with chilling candor on camera to military investigators about choosing targets at random. But absent from the narrative until now has been the voices of the victims' families, some of whom witnessed the killings in villages near the U.S. base in the Taliban stronghold of Maiwand district. Security conditions in the area have thwarted efforts by military investigators and Afghan rights groups to learn more from the crime scenes. But after several weeks of trying to make contact, TIME was able to interview several family members about the events of those grim days between January and May.

One of the victims, Mullah Allah Dad, was said to have been the imam, or religious leader, of Qala Gai village, some four miles from Forward Operating Base Ramrod, where the accused soldiers, who were part of the 5th Stryker Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division, were stationed. According to his wife, who asked not to be named and relayed her story through her father, Dad, said to be in his early 40s, had just returned to the family compound from tending his fields on the morning of May 2 when the American soldiers arrived, and dragged him outside. She and their six children were inside the mud-

brick compound. Peering through a crack in the wall, she says she heard a volley of gunshots and saw her husband fall to the ground, into view. "I didn't know if he was dead or alive," she says. Soldiers then barged back inside and moved her into a room. Some of them searched the home, throwing furniture and belongings to the floor. As they exited, an Afghan translator ordered her not to leave and locked the door. There was a loud explosion; one of the two accused soldiers apparently exploded a grenade by Dad's body. His wife emerged to find her dead husband lying face down "naked and totally burned."

The dead man's father-in-law, Abdullah Jan, went to the Maiwand district office early that afternoon to retrieve Dad's remains. He said the local district official and intelligence director presented him with a black body bag and said they had taken pictures, adding, without remorse, that the killing was justified because an American soldier had told them: "This man [Dad] was carrying a grenade." After disputing that claim to no avail, he left with the body bag and went back to the village to conduct an immediate burial, as required by Islamic tradition.

A total of 12 soldiers now face charges in connection what are alleged to be some of the worst war crimes of the nine-year U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. Five are accused of committing the murders, while the other seven are charged with attempting to cover them up. Spc. Jeremy Morlock, 22, is accused of creating the "kill team" along with Staff Sgt. Calvin Gibbs, 22, who reportedly claimed to have gotten away with killings in Iraq. Some of the men also stand accused of drug use, and of collecting body parts from other Afghan casualties. If convicted, the five accused of murder face the death penalty or life in prison. Each has maintained his innocence. Some insist they were forced by Gibbs, their superior, to participate in the killings. In a video of his interrogation released by military prosecutors, Morlock described how Gibbs singled out an Afghan man and ordered that he be shot after he was blown up with a grenade.

When U.S. or NATO forces acknowledge killing Afghan civilians, they typically issue a formal apology, and a cash compensation - about \$2,000 in most cases - is paid to victims' relatives through the Afghan government. But family members of Dad and Marach Agha, another of the three Afghans allegedly killed by the soldiers, insist they've receive neither apology nor payment. "We have nothing for our loss," says Jan. Asked for confirmation, Maj. Kathleen Turner, a spokesperson for Joint Base Lewis-McChord, near Seattle, where the accused soldiers are being tried, declined to comment on grounds that the investigation was ongoing. And Abdul Qader Noorzai, director of the independent Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission in Kandahar, said that his organization has received no formal complaint from the victims' relatives. Because of the Taliban threat, he adds, "We have no access in that area."

Civilian casualties have cost the U.S. and its allies a lot of local support in critical areas like Kandahar, and with the damage already done in Maiwand, where major operations are now taking place, it's unlikely that even a guilty verdict with a hefty punishment would do much to reverse the trend. (To avert a public backlash, a top Army official has ordered that the images of the victims in the case not be made public.)

Jan, father-in-law of the slain imam, says any forthcoming punishment won't matter. People in his village "hated" the Americans even before these killings, he explained, because of errant airstrikes and heavy-handed night operations into private homes. The deep anti-American sentiment, he adds, has only grown worse since their religious leader was murdered. "The Americans really love to kill innocent people," he says. "We don't have a court for [the accused soldiers], but [God] will give them the strongest punishment." If he's reflecting local public sentiment, the chances of the U.S. mission uprooting the Taliban appear to be increasingly remote.