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How Much Is a Human Life Worth?

The Dilemma of the Kunduz Bombing

By Susanne Koelbl

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The German-ordered bombing in Kunduz left behind dozens of widows and orphans. Now, survivors and relatives of the dead are looking for compensation. Some, though, worry that the money will fall into the hands of the Taliban.

Everyone keeps asking the same question: What was Abdul Gafur doing, in the early morning hours of Sept. 4, at a place where bombs fell from the sky? What business did he have there at such a strange hour, shortly before 2 a.m.? The answer lies in the village of Yaqob Bai, where the bodies of 30 people killed that night are buried.

Abdul Gafur is alive, though sometimes he feels that it would be better if his body were also lying in the cemetery, on a gray, high plateau above the rooftops of the village, next to Abdul Salam, his brother, where green-and-white flags flap in the wind above the rows of fresh graves.

Now Gafur is sitting in a tearoom in the city of Kunduz, talking about the night of Sept. 4. He waves his arms wildly, as if to shake off the flames and the hail of embers and ashes. The aircraft are still flying inside his head, he says, or at least it seems that way to him.

Gafur, 23, is a young farmer with a downy beard on his chin and cheeks and a scarf wrapped around his neck to ward off the cold. The doctor who prescribed his medication told him that

his brother, Abdul Salam, had burned to death, had died on the spot at the river. The doctor also said that he too had serious injuries, except that his were invisible and would come to him at night.

A Koran and a Kalashnikov

It was a warm September evening during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. After Iftar, the breaking of the fast, the men of Yaqob Bai met under the old green sycamore maple trees in front of the mosque. Their wives had prepared an evening meal of grapes, raisin rice and roast lamb, and the 70 men were sitting in long rows under the trees.

The Taliban, the unofficial power in Yaqob Bai for the past two years, had gradually developed their base there, only 12 kilometers (7.5 miles) southwest of Kunduz and six kilometers from the camp of the German reconstruction team.

They found refuge with select contacts, including relatives, paid supporters and brothers in spirit -- or all three. Young men were particularly susceptible to the speeches given by the bearded men who, holding a Koran in one hand and a Kalashnikov in the other, exuded strength. But most people, particularly older residents, remembered the atrocities committed by their predecessors all too well.

The road to Yaqob Bai is freshly paved, thanks to the reconstruction efforts, in which the Germans play a key role in the region. But the Kunduz police have stopped patrolling the area. The roads through the fertile river valley are lined with hidden Taliban guards, and when the police drive by in their open pickups, the Taliban activate roadside bombs and fire at them with their rocket launchers. Afghan President Hamid Karzai's government is nonexistent in Yaqob Bai.

Resistance Had Become Pointless

When the Taliban killed the son of the village elder because he was working as a day laborer on a road project funded by the Karzai government, even the old people in Yaqob Bai gave up their resistance to the radicals. Resistance had become pointless.

On that Thursday evening in early September, several dozen Taliban kidnapped two tanker trucks on the road between Kunduz and Baghlan. The trucks were carrying thousands of liters of gasoline destined for the American military. The kidnappers included the brother of Maulawi Naim, the Taliban leader in the village of Yaqob Bai.

A short time later, however, the truck, with its valuable load, became stuck on a sandbar in the Kunduz River in the southwestern part of the city. All of this happened only three kilometers from Yaqob Bai, where the men were still sitting underneath the trees, eating their supper.

Four months previously, officials at the headquarters of the Afghan intelligence service had sent Major General Mohammed Daud Ibrahimi to Kunduz. He is from Kunduz and once served as the chief of intelligence for the legendary military strategist Ahmad Shah Massoud, a record that earns him the respect of combatants.

'We Have to Obey Them'

Kunduz has become a problem for all of Afghanistan. It is the Taliban's strategic center in the north, where the extremists have become so bold that they have been known to stroll through the city's downtown bazaars. "The people we are fighting at night are good farmers during the day, when they hide their weapons in closets," says Daud, a rotund man, pointing to a large map of the area that was bombed. That was the situation on Sept. 4, he says: Taliban, unarmed and in civilian clothing.

Who, then, are the Taliban exactly? Siqadullah comes from Omar Khel, where the bodies of 18 bombing victims are believed to be buried in the cemetery. When he is told that a visitor from the West wants to speak with him, Siqadullah quickly hides behind a wall, anxious not to be seen. A Pashtun, he wears a small velvet cap. He is only 14, but he is familiar with the Taliban's punishments for those who communicate with foreigners. "When the police come," he whispers, "the Taliban hide in our house. They have weapons. We have to obey them."

The names of the people who were killed and wounded in the bombing attack on the tanker truck are listed in a secret report prepared by the national chief of police in Afghanistan, following an extensive investigation ordered by President Karzai. The entries include the victims' names, the villages where they lived, whether they were Taliban, whether they were armed and, if they were Taliban, what their role was in the Taliban hierarchy. According to the list, 140 people died, of which 43 were armed. However, many of the unarmed victims are also listed as members of the Taliban.

Barrels and Drums

Twenty-four people on the list were residents of Yaqob Bai, and all are identified as Taliban. "We know them. We know their names and their addresses. They are not innocent," says General Daud.

Abdul Gafur, the farmer from Yaqob Bai, reached the bend in the river at 9:30 p.m. He and his younger brother, Abdul Salam, had brought along a large yellow fuel canister.

The Taliban had come to the men at the mosque and ordered them to get their tractors to help pull the tankers out of the river. In return, each of them would be allowed to tap some of the gasoline for free. More than 100 men and adolescents from Yaqob Bai quickly hurried off to the river, stumbling through the night, carrying barrels and drums.

The citizens of Yaqob Bai are almost all tenant farmers who are forced to share their meager harvests with a landlord. Gafur's neighbor, a father of four boys and two girls, was a laborer who earned \$2 (€1.36) on good days. The opportunity to get free fuel before the winter was an attractive proposition for the man. "Should I have said to him: Don't go, that's stolen gasoline, it would be better for us to freeze in the winter?", his widow, Bidri Jamala, asked after the incident.

'The Germans Won't Do Anything to Us'

Hundreds of people were already crowded around the two tankers at the river, and even after three hours, Abdul Gafur hadn't managed to fill his canister. His brother Salam, though, was faster and made it to the front of the crowd.

Gafur, who had sat down in the grass for a moment, noticed two planes up in the sky. "The Germans," he thought, "they see us, but they won't do anything to us."

But then, accompanied by an earsplitting hissing and booming noise, bombs suddenly exploded in the night, hurling the people at the river several meters up into the air. Flames seemed to erupt from the earth and the river. The shock wave knocked Abdul Gafur into the water, but somehow he managed to swim to the other side. "I knew right away that Salam was dead," he says.

They found Salam on the riverbank. His face was the only part of his body that hadn't been burned. Abdul Salam was only 15.

How Much Is a Kunduz Victim Worth?

By now, hundreds of people carrying flashlights and oil lamps were searching the wreckage for family members. The Taliban had notified supporters and relatives in about half a dozen villages within a 10-kilometer radius. "They're all dead," Abdul Gafur called out to Bidri Jamala, his neighbor, whom he encountered on his way home. "Only I and a few others survived." The 30-year-old woman lost her husband Mohammed Ali and the oldest of her six children, a boy, at the river. The husband's brother, who could have helped feed her family, also died.

The attorney Karim Popal hasn't lived in Afghanistan for 30 years. He has a legal practice in the northern German city of Bremen -- but the Kunduz bombing incident made him world-famous overnight. He is demanding compensation from the German government for the trauma suffered by Abdul Gafur and for the death of his brother Salam. He wants Berlin to pay Bidri Jamala a pension and to compensate Balkiza, a mother of 10 children from the village of Isa Khel who lost her husband, the construction worker Abdul Bashir, so that her children will have a future.

A few weeks ago, Popal -- who traveled to Kunduz himself -- obtained power of attorney from the 70 families that have been affected so far, for a potential class action lawsuit. But, as Popal claims, the total number is much higher: 173 cases, all of them civilians.

How Much Is a Human Life Worth?

The incident has triggered a bizarre dispute between Germany and Afghanistan over compensation for war dead and the question of who exactly the victims of the Kunduz truck bombing were. At the core of the dispute, however, is a question: How much is a human life worth?

So far, the Afghan government has paid \$2,000 to 30 family members whose dead relatives were clearly defined as civilians, according to the government's own standards, as well as \$1,000 each to nine other Afghans injured in the air strike. The governor of Kunduz, Mohammed Omar, who is strictly opposed to making any further payments, says: "Do you want to bankroll the Taliban now, as well?"

In the Kunduz case, it will likely be difficult to find common ground between the German sense of justice and Afghan customs. According to the Pashtun code of honor, the Pashtunwali, the family of an offender traditionally offers one of its girls to the aggrieved clan. The girl then spends the rest of her life working as a maid, stripped of her rights, in the house of the victim's family. Blood money is also a respectable form of compensation, as it avoids a vicious circle of revenge.

But after the appearance of the Afghan attorney from Germany in Kunduz, some of the families affected by the air strike now believe that they will soon be set for life. The Germans will have to pay "millions and millions" for his son Amanullah, says Abdul Feroz, a 50-year-old farmer from the village of Isa Kehl, which is also believed to be infiltrated by the Taliban.

The Dust Settled Quickly

While the case almost triggered a government crisis in Germany, the dust settled over the bombing debacle in Afghanistan surprisingly quickly. In contrast, similar tragedies in the south of the country have triggered massive protests against both the government and Western troops. But in Kunduz, only the Taliban was able to use the bombing for its own propaganda purposes. "Here you have the evidence that the Germans have not come here to help, but to kill Muslims," Taliban leader Maulawi Naim told the survivors in the mosque at Yaqob Bai on the day of the funeral. The village of 400 people lost almost one-tenth of its population.

But according to one interpretation of the Koran, a person who helps a thief or profits from stolen goods is also considered a thief -- a notion that also brought shame on the mourners.

The political events in Germany -- the resignation of the former defense minister and the dismissal of the Bundeswehr inspector general -- were met with great astonishment among government officials in Kunduz, where everyone from the governor to the police chief has had nothing but praise for the courage of Colonel Georg Klein, the German soldier who ordered the bombing. "He did the only right thing," they say.

Abdul Malek, the driver of one of the two kidnapped trucks, survived. About three kilometers beyond the Kunduz city limits, says Malek, 25 armed men suddenly appeared. The men, who were not even wearing shoes, "threatened us, saying that they were poor and wanted to take the tanker to their village so that they could tap the gasoline," he says. The men forced the driver, at gunpoint, to drive toward the west, away from the main road. Some of the Taliban sat with the driver in the cab, while the others jogged along behind the truck. When they reached a river and attempted to cross it, the trucks became stuck on a sandbar. The Taliban, furious, began beating Malek, the driver, and killed the driver of the other truck with a shot to the head.

'Bombs Were About to Fall'

According to Malek, Abdul Rahman, a local Taliban leader, appeared at the river, but he soon drove away again in a police pickup his fighters had captured.

Malek reports that about 200 people gathered around the trucks, including about 35 armed Taliban, who guarded the trucks and monitored the distribution of gasoline to the villagers.

"Those people were clearly ordinary farmers from the villages," says Malek, "but many knew the armed Taliban, greeted them by name and thanked them for the gasoline." Malek claims that the Taliban even warned the villagers when the German planes began circling above the tankers at high altitude. "They shouted that the people should move away from the trucks, because bombs were about to fall," says Malek, "but no one wanted to give up the free gasoline."