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US military attacked for complicity in Afghan child soldiers after boy's murder

Thursday 4 February

The Taliban's murder of a 10-year old Afghan boy this week has cast a spotlight on the practice by US allies of turning children into fighters in the war-torn country.

Afghans have hailed the heroism of Wasil Ahmad, whom the Taliban killed in Uruzgan province on Monday for fighting alongside his uncle with a US-backed government militia called the Afghan Local Police.

Child soldier became a kind of grim celebrity in Afghanistan after he reportedly helped break a Taliban siege last summer

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Wasil had won acclaim for helping ALP forces break an insurgent siege after his uncle, the unit's commander, was wounded. He was declared a national hero by the Afghan government, and paraded, wearing an oversized uniform and wielding an AK-47.

Overshadowed in the outpouring of grief is the grim practice of allowing children to take up arms, particularly alongside a quasi-official force created by the US military.

“There's nothing heroic about putting a child in danger by arming him and having him fight in a war. The Taliban killed 10-year-old Wasil Ahmad, but those who encouraged him to fight bear

responsibility as well,” said Patricia Gossman, the senior Afghanistan researcher for Human Rights Watch.

Afghan officials said that Wasil Ahmad was not formally part of the Afghan Local Police, but his uncle Samad, whose forces the young man fought alongside, was. Child soldiering is supposed to be illegal in Afghanistan, but a September report from Child Soldiers International said that recruitment of child soldiers by Afghan security forces, including the Afghan Local Police, is “ongoing”, though at a recently reduced rate.

Created in 2010, the Afghan Local Police, known as ALP, is largely an invention of the US military, and was initially overseen by elite US special operations forces. Critics have long pointed to persistent human-rights abuse allegations within an entity they fear provides cover for the empowerment of militias.

According to a US government audit in October, the US Defense Department has provided \$469.7m to the ALP from inception through April 2015, and estimates that the force will cost approximately \$121m annually to sustain.

The same audit chided the Pentagon for lacking plans to disband the ALP or transition its 30,000 fighters to the official security services after US sponsorship ends, a switch currently slated for September.

A June 2015 International Crisis Group report portrayed the ALP as “hastily raised forces with little training” which often inspired the violence it was meant to confront, through “extortion, kidnapping [and] extrajudicial killings”. It warned that the rising tide of violence in Afghanistan creates pressures on the country’s authorities to turn to the ALP as an expedient – despite questions over their effectiveness and human-rights record.

“A minority of villagers describe it as an indispensable source of protection, without which their districts would become battlegrounds or insurgent havens, but it is more common to hear complaints that ALP prey upon the people they are supposed to guard,” the International Crisis Group reported.

US military officials in Afghanistan, the Pentagon and US Central Command did not answer the Guardian’s questions about US funding going to Afghan militias that employ child soldiers.

“Recruiting child soldiers violates international law and Afghan law, but tragically it’s been a longstanding practice by some Afghan militias and ALP. Even though some of these forces get US support, there has been little effort to hold abusive commanders accountable for such crimes. It’s high time the Afghan government matched its words with action to end the practice of recruiting child soldiers,” said Human Rights Watch’s Gossman.

A spokesman for the provincial governor of Uruzgan, Dost Mohammad Nayab, said Wasil’s uncle was an ALP commander but Wasil himself was not officially a member of the ALP. He said Wasil took up arms to help avenge the deaths of 16 family members who had been killed by the Taliban; all had been members of the ALP.

Sediq Sediqqi, the interior ministry spokesman, also said Wasil was not a member of the ALP, as the recruitment of children is against the policies of the Afghan government. Child Soldiers International noted in September that the government has criminalized only the use of child soldiers at “military installations”, and does not “prohibit the recruitment and use of children by armed groups”.

The Taliban’s use of child soldiers dwarfs that of the ALP, according to a United Nations report last year. The report found the ALP to use one child soldier in 2014 compared with the Taliban’s 20, a drop in child soldier usage in 2014, though it cautioned that the figures were probably undercounted. It additionally found the ALP rejected 55 applicants for being too young to serve.

The Pentagon referred to a State Department statement on aid to foreign militaries: “Consistent with US law and policy, the Department of State vets its assistance to foreign security forces, as well as certain Department of Defense training programs, to ensure that recipients have not committed gross human rights abuses. When the vetting process uncovers credible information that an individual or unit has committed a gross violation of human rights, US assistance is withheld.”