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US accused of blocking Afghan inquiry

By Richard Leiby and Ernesto Londoño

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Kabul - Hamid Karzai, the Afghan president, accused the US on Friday of obstructing an investigation into the killings of 16 Afghan civilians and suggested that more than one soldier may have been involved.

After a sombre palace meeting with relatives of the victims, Mr Karzai seemed to support villagers' insistence that the staff sergeant being held by the US military for the killings did not act alone.

"They believe it's not possible for one person to do that," Mr Karzai told reporters, citing one man's account of the Sunday massacre in Kandahar province. "In his family, in four rooms, people were killed, women and children were killed, and they were all brought together in one room and then put on fire. That, one man cannot do."

The president said he was "at the end of the rope" over the issue of civilian casualties in the decade-long conflict and was not satisfied with how the US was conducting the probe into the Kandahar rampage.

The Afghan army chief "has just reported that the Afghan investigation team did not receive the co-operation that they expected from the United States," Mr Karzai said. "Therefore these are all questions that we'll be raising, and raising very loudly and raising very clearly."

The US embassy in Kabul and a spokesman for Nato's International Security Assistance Force said the military would not comment on Mr Karzai's claims. "We don't have anything to add or to comment on regarding his statements," Lieutenant Colonel Jimmie Cummings said.

Televised footage from the gathering of relatives in the palace reflected a sense of frustration and rage among the victims' relatives, to the point of rejecting compensation that was offered for the loss of loved ones.

"Mr. President, I do not want money," said a villager sitting next to Mr Karzai. "I want the killer to be punished, punished, punished."

The staff sergeant accused in the killing is en route to the United States, where he will almost certainly will face a military trial. US officials have said the severity of his alleged crime could mean that if convicted, he would face the death penalty.

But a trial on US soil seems to offer little solace to outraged Afghans, who in addition to the village massacre have been buffeted by reports of Korans burnt on a US military base and of American soldiers urinating on the corpses of Taliban insurgents.

There is also tension between the US and Afghanistan over the issue of night raids on civilian locations in search of Taliban leaders, and questions about how long foreign troops should remain in Afghanistan and under what conditions.