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The Wall Street Journal

## U.S. Blames Senior Afghan in Deaths

By Maria Abi-Habib

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### Americans Say They Have Proof Provincial Power Broker Ordered Attack That Killed 2 Troops; Karzai Says Case Closed

KABUL - American officials are pressing the Afghan government to prosecute a former governor for what U.S. investigators say is involvement in the killings of an American lieutenant colonel and a U.S. servicewoman, as well as other alleged crimes.

President Hamid Karzai's administration has rejected requests to prosecute Ghulam Qawis Abu Bakr for the killings and for alleged corruption, saying evidence is lacking. Mr. Abu Bakr, who remains a power broker in his province of Kapisa just north of Kabul, has denied the U.S. allegations.

Mr. Karzai, who appointed Mr. Abu Bakr as governor in 2007 and removed him three years later, has declared the Abu Bakr case to be closed.

The U.S. still considers pursuing the former governor a priority for Afghan law enforcement, U.S. officials say. "As far as we are concerned, the case is still open," a senior U.S. official says.

Relations between Mr. Karzai's administration and its U.S. backers have been increasingly acrimonious after a spate of shooting attacks by Afghan troops on their U.S. allies and the March massacre of civilians allegedly perpetrated by a U.S. soldier in Kandahar province.

Details of U.S. findings about Mr. Abu Bakr haven't been previously disclosed. U.S. investigators allege Mr. Abu Bakr ordered the May 2009 suicide bombing that killed Air Force Lt. Col. Mark Stratton, 39 years old, and Senior Airman Ashton Goodman, a 21-year-old servicewoman working with him, according to a summary of the investigation, shown to The Wall Street Journal by the investigators.

The report also alleges that Mr. Abu Bakr plotted to kill U.S., French and British ambassadors that November, and that he was involved in acts of extortion and corruption.

Mr. Abu Bakr denies the allegations and doesn't wish to speak to the media, said his son-in-law, Mohammed Iqbal Safi, a member of Afghanistan's parliament. Mr. Safi said rival government officials were trying to frame his father-in-law, and have "poisoned the Americans' minds."

Appointed as governor by Mr. Karzai in 2007, Mr. Abu Bakr is a former mujahedeen commander affiliated with the Hezb-i-Islami movement founded by warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Mr. Abu Bakr has met regularly with senior Hezb-i-Islami insurgent commanders in Kapisa, providing them with weapons, police vehicles and lists of people cooperating with coalition troops, according to investigators.

Many prominent members of Hezb-i-Islami have chosen to join Mr. Karzai's administration, saying they have split from the insurgent wing of the group. And on Thursday, Hezb-i-Islami suspended talks with the U.S. and Afghan governments, as the Taliban did this month, in another set back to the U.S.-led coalition's exit strategy.

"Abu Bakr is being protected because he is connected with the political parties that represent power—in this case, Hezb-i-Islami," says Jean d'Amécourt, the former ambassador of France, which oversees security in Kapisa.

Mr. Karzai's chief spokesman, Aimal Faizi, said Mr. Abu Bakr "is not protected by anyone in the Afghan government," adding that "we find such allegations and accusations baseless."

U.S. investigators allege that witness statements, other documents and wiretaps show Mr. Abu Bakr has been routinely extorting from contractors a share of the funds they received from the U.S. military.

In early 2009, as corruption allegations against Mr. Abu Bakr mounted, the Provincial Reconstruction Team, a U.S. military unit overseeing the development projects, broke off almost all contact with him, a decision that would direct aid money to rivals.

Mr. Abu Bakr subsequently invited the American PRT commander for Kapisa to an unscheduled security meeting on May 26, U.S. officials say.

By coincidence, the convoy of Col. Stratton, commander of the PRT in neighboring Panjshir province, was traveling that morning on the same road.

Col. Stratton and Airman Goodman were weeks away from the end of their deployments. Their families say they were both passionate about development work—which included helping to build a road through the Panjshir valley.

"This road is probably the single greatest thing I have accomplished in my career," Col. Stratton wrote home in an email 11 days before his death.

As the convoy was traveling through an intersection, a suicide bomber slammed his explosives-laden Toyota Corolla into the Humvee that carried Col. Stratton and Airman Goodman.

Col. Stratton, a native of Alabama, left behind his wife and three small children. Airman Goodman, from Indianapolis, was unmarried.

Shortly after the blast, according to the report, Hezb-i-Islami issued a statement taking responsibility for killing the PRT commander for Kapisa, who wasn't in the vicinity of the attack.

The statement gave "every impression it was a targeted murder" that claimed the wrong victim, U.S. findings say.

Sources told the investigators that the bombing was planned by senior police commanders in Kapisa and carried out by Hezb-i-Islami insurgents on Mr. Abu Bakr's orders, according to the findings. Police supervisors told a Kapisa police officer probing the attack to drop his inquiry, the findings said.

A few months after the strike on the PRT convoy, another attack was in the works. The U.S., French and U.K. ambassadors to Kabul were supposed to visit Kapisa, accompanied by government ministers, in November 2009. According to U.S. investigation findings, Mr. Abu Bakr's associates armed local insurgents with rocket-propelled grenades and informed them about the time and location of the meeting. This time, the coalition got wind of the plot in time.

At about 11 p.m. the night before the planned visit, Mr. d'Amecourt, the former French ambassador, says he received calls from U.S. and British intelligence representatives warning him that an ambush was being prepared. He said he had seen no evidence Mr. Abu Bakr was personally responsible.

U.S. officials say they have wiretaps and statements by over a dozen well-placed sources in the Afghan government and law enforcement agencies that prove their allegations against Mr. Abu Bakr.

In February 2010, the Major Crimes Task Force, which includes carefully vetted Afghan investigators and coalition advisers, began a formal investigation into allegations against Mr. Abu Bakr. The then commander of coalition forces, U.S. Army Gen. David Petraeus, handed the file outlining these allegations to Mr. Karzai during a meeting in Kabul that summer, U.S. officials said.

In August 2010, following that meeting, Mr. Karzai suspended Mr. Abu Bakr from his governor's job.

But the Afghan government has repeatedly rejected American calls to prosecute the former governor. Last year, Afghan prosecutors were removed from the case and sent to outlying provinces, U.S. officials said.

Witnesses, meanwhile, were pressured by Mr. Abu Bakr's associates to change their statements, U.S. investigators say, according to the summary of findings.

Afghan Deputy Attorney General Rahmatullah Nazari said the case was shut down last year due to lack of evidence. He said there was no government effort to cover up evidence.

Mr. Karzai, asked about Mr. Abu Bakr in a recent interview with The Wall Street Journal, said the matter was closed.

"The issue has been going on for almost two years now," he explained. "When the U.S. military came to me repeatedly I called a meeting of the judicial law enforcement body, the entire body, the anticorruption department, the judiciary, the justice department, the Attorney General they all told me unanimously that the U.S. has not provided any evidence other than tape recordings."

Asked whether he shouldn't have fired Mr. Abu Bakr after all, Mr. Karzai said: "Well, that's a different issue."

Wiretaps aren't usually admissible as evidence under Afghan law. U.S. officials say they have plenty of additional evidence that would be admissible in court, and that they won't give up on efforts to bring Mr. Abu Bakr to justice.

"We have very long memories," a U.S. official says.

—Yaroslav Trofimov and Habib Khan Totakhil contributed to this article. Accused

Ex-governor shadowed by allegations

- 2007 President Hamid Karzai names Ghulam Qawis Abu Bakr, left, an affiliate of insurgent group Hezb-i-Islami, governor of Kapisa province
- Early 2009 Citing corruption, U.S. development team in Kapisa breaks off work with Abu Bakr
- May 26 Abu Bakr calls meeting with PRT commander. After suicide bomber attacks a U.S. convoy, killing 2 Americans, Hezb-i-Islami says it killed Kapisa PRT commander—but he was far from the blast, and uninjured
- November Coalition gets wind of plot to attack ambassadors on visit to Kapisa. U.S. later blames plot on Abu Bakr and associates

- February 2010 Major Crimes Task Force opens investigation
- Summer 2010 Gen. David Petraeus gives Karzai a file of allegations against Abu Bakr. In August, Karzai removes Abu Bakr from governorship
- 2011 Afghan attorney general says Abu Bakr case is closed