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Top Afghans Tied to '90s Carnage, Researchers Say

By ROD NORDLAND

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Massoud, Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum, Vice President Marshal Muhammad Qasim Fahim and Second Vice President Karim Khalili are named in the report.

MAZAR-I-SHARIF, Afghanistan -- The atrocities of the Afghan civil war in the 1990s are still recounted in whispers here -- tales of horror born out of a scorched-earth ethnic and factional conflict in which civilians and captured combatants were frequently slaughtered en masse.



Tarpaulin covers the site of the mass grave where, experts say, the remains of at least 16 victims were found

Stark evidence of such killings are held in the mass graves that still litter the Afghan countryside. One such site is outside Mazar-i-Sharif, in the north. It lies only half-excavated, with bones and the remains of clothing partially obscured by water and mud from recent flooding. Experts say at least 16 victims are here, and each skull that lies exposed is uniformly punctured by a single bullet-entry hole at the back.

The powerful men accused of responsibility for these deaths and tens of thousands of others -- some said to be directly at their orders, others carried out by men in their chain of command -- are named in the pages of a monumental 800-page report on human rights abuses in Afghanistan from the Soviet era in the '80s to the fall of the Taliban in 2001, according to researchers and officials who helped compile the study over the past six years.



A human skull and bones at a mass grave near the Afghan town of Mazar-i-Sharif. Such graves still litter the countryside.



The mass graves that were found include sites in the Dasht-e-Leili desert, and at Dehdadi, Khalid Ibn al-Walid and Kefayet Square.

The list of names is a sort of who's who of power players in Afghanistan: former and current warlords or officials, some now in very prominent positions in the national government, as well as in insurgent factions fighting it. Many of the named men were principals in the civil war era after the Soviet Union withdrew, and they are also frequently mentioned when talk here turns to fears of violence after the end of the NATO combat mission in 2014. Already, there is growing concern about a scramble for power and resources along ethnic and tribal lines.

But the report seeking to hold them accountable is unlikely to be released anytime soon, the researchers say, accusing senior Afghan officials of effectively suppressing the work and those

responsible for it. For their part, human rights activists say the country is doomed to repeat its violent past if abuses are not brought to light and prosecuted.

At the same time, some officials here -- including some American diplomats -- express worry that releasing the report will actually trigger new civil strife.

Titled simply, "Conflict Mapping in Afghanistan Since 1978," the study, prepared by the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, details the locations and details of 180 mass graves of civilians or prisoners, many of the sites secret and none of them yet excavated properly. It compiles testimony from survivors and witnesses to the mass interments, and details other war crimes as well.



A mass grave, covered by the brick structure on bottom right, was found near Mazar-i-Sharif in northern Afghanistan.

The study was commissioned as part of a reconciliation and justice effort ordered by President Hamid Karzai in 2005, and it was completed this past December. Some of the world's top experts in forensics and what is called transitional justice advised the commission on the report and provided training and advice for the 40 researchers who worked on it over a six-year period.

Three Afghan and foreign human rights activists who worked as researchers and analysts on large sections of the report spoke about its contents on condition of anonymity, both out of fear of reprisal and because the commission had not authorized them to discuss it publicly.

According to Afghan rights advocates and Western officials, word that the report was near to being officially submitted to the president apparently prompted powerful former warlords, including the first vice president, Marshal Muhammad Qasim Fahim, to demand that Mr. Karzai dismiss the commissioner responsible, Ahmad Nader Nadery.

At a meeting on Dec. 21, including Mr. Karzai and other top officials, Marshal Fahim argued that dismissing Mr. Nadery would actually be too mild a punishment. "We should just shoot 30 holes in his face," he said, according to one of those present. He later apologized to other officials for the remark, saying it was not meant in earnest.

Mr. Karzai did remove Mr. Nadery. But a spokesman for the president, Aimal Faizi, said it was "irresponsible and untrue" to say that the president fired Mr. Nadery because of the mass graves report or was trying to block its release. He also called the accounts of the Dec. 21 meeting with Marshal Fahim and other officials "totally baseless."

Mr. Nadery had finished two five-year terms as a commissioner and the president was legally entitled to replace him, Mr. Faizi said. "This decision has nothing to do with any A.I.H.R.C. report on war atrocities," he said. "We believe that if there is any such report by the A.I.H.R.C., sooner or later it will come up and will be published one day."

The figures accused in the report of playing some role in mass killings include some of the most powerful figures in Afghanistan's government and ethnic factions, including the Northern Alliance that fought the Taliban in 2001.

Among them are First Vice President Fahim, a Tajik from the Jamiat Islami Party, and Second Vice President Karim Khalili, a Hazara leader from the Wahdat Party; Gen. Atta Mohammed Noor, a Tajik from the Jamiat Islami Party and now the governor of the important northern province of Balkh, of which Mazar-i-Sharif is capital; and Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum, a former Uzbek warlord from the Jumbush Party who holds the honorary title of chief of staff to the supreme commander of the Afghan Armed Forces, among many others.

Those men gave no response to verbal and written requests for comment about their naming in the report.

In all, the researchers said, more than 500 Afghans are named in the report as responsible for mass killings, including the country's revered national martyr, Ahmed Shah Massoud, one of the last militia leaders to hold out against the Taliban sweep to power and who was assassinated by Al Qaeda just before the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The report also investigates killings of civilians and prisoners said to be carried out by the Taliban and other insurgents, including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of the Hezb-i-Islami insurgents.

Named specifically in the report as responsible for war crimes in massacres of prisoners in Mazar-i-Sharif are two Taliban commanders now held at the Guantánamo Bay prison camp -- Mullah Fazul Akhund and Mullah Khairullah Khirkawa -- and whose release is thought to be a condition of negotiations with the insurgent group.

Entombed Evidence

As the report languishes, evidence in the graves is being destroyed, sometimes as a function of poor care of the sites and sometimes intentionally.

One mass grave containing more than 100 dead was discovered in the Kefayet Square area of Mazar-i-Sharif, where General Noor holds sway, during a road-building project in March. The half-dozen bodies that were turned up were simply relocated to a cemetery and the construction went on, bulldozing over most of the rest of the remains.

In 2007, two mass graves in the Khalid Ibn al-Walid township of Mazar were simply covered over by construction of a new residential complex that researchers said was developed and owned by General Noor.

A researcher for the Afghan rights commission who investigated both of the graves in Khalid Ibn al-Walid said the victims were killed by General Noor's political party, which had what the researcher called a "human slaughterhouse" on the site in the 1990s, as well as by the Taliban, who later took over the same facility for the same purpose.

In the case of the grave with exposed skulls, it was discovered in January by American and Afghan workers during a United States Army Corps of Engineers construction project in Dehdadi District, six miles outside Mazar-i-Sharif -- one of at least two graves found there so far. Human rights investigators said that grave dated from the period when General Dostum and his Hazara allies controlled the site; the victims, their wrists still bound in many cases with stout twine, included women and children, judging from the clothing found with them.

During the civil war period, after the Communists were defeated and before the Taliban took power, warlords like General Noor, General Dostum, and the Hazara leader Hajji Mohammad Mohaqiq fought bitterly among themselves as well as against the Taliban, who are mostly ethnic Pashtuns. The conflict among these leaders, who had all fought in the jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, was on both political and ethnic grounds.

For many Afghans, the warlords' atrocities are taken as a given -- old news better left unrevived.

"It will take us centuries to forget this," said an Afghan National Army lieutenant colonel. "We don't want to go back to those bad days again."

In all, 13 mass graves have been identified in the Mazar-i-Sharif area, including one detailed by human rights workers in the Dasht-e-Leili desert in the neighboring Jawjzan Province, believed to contain 2,000 Taliban prisoners slaughtered by General Dostum's forces.

"That grave was there and then suddenly it was not there," said a second human rights worker who worked on the investigation in Jawjzan. "They just got rid of all the evidence."

He said bulldozers were brought in during 2008 to remove the bodies, leaving huge pits behind. The remains were reportedly incinerated at a secret location, he said.

A Question of Will

Mr. Nadery would not discuss the contents of the mapping report except in the most general way. "You open the map in the report, you see there are dots everywhere," he said. "Everyone should know that what they suffered was not unique. We should be able to tell our people: 'This is our past, this is our history. It's ugly, it's bad, but we should be able to face it.' "

He said he still hoped that the commission would be able to submit the report, although he conceded that those prospects looked dim.

"I don't want the report to become an event, just a headline for one day," he said. Instead, he said, it needs to be presented officially so it can be acted on officially, whether by the Afghan government or by the international community.

He said the report tallied more than a million people killed in the conflict and 1.3 million disabled, although not all of those are necessarily victims of war crimes.

Other human-rights officials in Afghanistan also expressed urgency about releasing the report.

"There are lots of examples where a report like this was an important first step to bringing justice for the victims," said Heather Barr, head of the Human Rights Watch office in Afghanistan. "It does put pressure on people who are named; it leads at least to marginalizing them."

The volatility of the accusations was on full display in April, when a well-established but small political bloc, the Afghanistan Solidarity Party, held a demonstration against what it said were war criminals in government. "For us there is no difference between the Taliban and these war criminals," said Hafizullah Rasikh, a party spokesman. "They are like twin brothers."

Parliament responded with a declaration accusing the party of treason and demanding its disbandment.

A former mujahedeen commander, Abdul Hafiz Mansoor, who is now an editor of a weekly publication called Mujahed, did not deny that many atrocities took place, on all sides.

"One cannot make war with rosewater," he said, referring to a popular ingredient in sweets and perfumes here. "If this war and all these killings were so bad, then why aren't we putting their international backers on trial? If we talk about violation of human rights, we should accuse the U.N. special representative for Afghanistan, who supported the mujahedeen at the time and now calls them warlords. Or President Ronald Reagan, who provided these warlords and human rights violators with Stinger missiles."

The American Embassy here has been another source of objection to the mass-graves report. American officials say releasing the report would be a bad idea, at least until after Afghanistan's 2014 presidential election -- which is also when the NATO combat withdrawal should be complete. "I have to tell you frankly on the mapping thing, when I first learned about it, it scared

me," said a senior American official, speaking on condition of anonymity as a matter of embassy policy. "There will be a time for it, but I'm not persuaded this is the time."

"It's going to reopen all the old wounds," the official said, noting that several men who were bitter rivals during the civil war were at least nominally working together in the government now.

For its part, the United Nations has supported release of the report. "The U.N. position has always been that such reports should always be released publicly," said Georgette Gagnon, the top human rights officer for the United Nations mission in Afghanistan. "But it's up to the commission and we would support whatever they decide to do."

Of the 180 graves documented in the report, only one has so far been exhumed forensically because the Afghan authorities lack the facilities to carry out DNA testing and the sort of scientific identification of remains that was done systematically in Bosnia.

That one was a grave on the grounds of the Interior Ministry in Kabul, according to M. Ashraf Bakhteyari, head of the Forensic Science Organization, a foreign-trained group that carried out the exhumation. Mr. Bakhteyari said he was ordered by the Interior Ministry not to divulge who the victims were. "It is classified information," he said.

He is frank, though, about the prospects for investigating the rest of Afghanistan's mass graves. "It is impossible to prosecute those who are responsible for the mass graves," Mr. Bakhteyari said. "Neither the international community nor the Afghan government have the will to do that."