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The price of dying for Afghanistan

Families forced to search for fallen kin as Afghan army fails to fulfil its promise to return dead soldiers' bodies.

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78-year-old Najmuddin spent 44 days searching for his son Esa's body

Kandahar, Afghanistan - After searching for 44 days, 78-year-old Najmuddin finally found the body of his son, an Afghan army lieutenant, in a freezer in this southern Afghan city.

"I searched and searched. I asked everyone that I came across," said the old man, looking up to the sky and repeating he had "no one but God".

His son, 24-year-old Mohamad Esa, had joined the army after he returned from five years of labouring in Iran. He died after a bullet pierced his left torso while serving in the 1st Battalion, 2nd Brigade, 215 Maiwand Corps. Despite an injury to the back of his head, his face was calm and unscathed.

For Najmuddin, finding his son's body was not the end of his odyssey. The trials he faced when transporting the corpse to his home village in northern Takhar province point to the Afghan army's failure to take care of its fighters after they die on the battlefield.

As the security forces increasingly take the lead in the war against the Taliban, their casualties rise in numbers. In the past seven months alone, more than 870 army soldiers have been killed and the rate of police casualties is believed to be double that.

Mishandling the deceased impacts the morale of a force already fighting a difficult battle against an enemy whose identity is becoming more and more nebulous. As much as 85 per cent of the casualties inflicted on the Afghan security forces are caused by Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), officials say.

Far from home

The Afghan police, because of its deeper reach in the communities, more regular patrols, and less advanced equipment, suffer double the casualties of the army. But the police deployment is mostly local, often within the officer's province of origin, making the delivery of the deceased's body easier.

The army's deployment, however, is national, with soldiers often finding themselves on duty far from home. In Esa's case, that distance was about 950km.

"In our policy, the martyred soldier's body and the wounded take priority over the living soldiers," insists General Zaher Azimi, the spokesman for the Afghan ministry of defence. "Wherever our soldiers are martyred - sometimes there is a delay of a day or two in their transfer because of transportation problems - but the family should not be searching for their martyr. We are responsible to bring the martyr to their home."

In reality, as the plight of Lieutenant Esa shows, families often have to search for the dead and arrange for their own transportation.

Sources at the mortuary in Kandahar military corps say the bodies of soldiers are kept there for up to two months; if the family does not come to collect them, they are buried in a cemetery near

the corps. At least four other bodies still remained in the freezer after the corpses of Esa and Said Imam, a captain fatally burned by an IED incident in Garmsir, were collected by family members.

After explaining his government's policy on deceased soldiers and the sensitivity of the matter, General Azimi admitted his army "does not have a single aircraft", except for helicopters.

The fifteen transport planes worth \$275m acquired for the army "have been sleeping at the airfield," he says.

The planes have **reportedly** been "grounded for months because of lack of adequate maintenance and potential safety problems", and the army relies on the international coalition planes for transport.

"The Afghan government is responsible for the movement of the remains of ANSF [Afghan National Security Force] members killed in action," says Lieutenant Colonel Les Carroll, a spokesperson for the international coalition. "If the Afghan authorities exhaust all options for transportation, they can then send an Air Movement Request to ISAF [the International Security Assistance Force], which ISAF can consider if air transport is available."

Family initiative

Amid this confusion, families often take the initiative, frequently relying on private airlines. The government-run Ariana Airlines charges about \$130 for transporting a soldier's body from Kandahar to Kabul - a substantial sum, given that soldiers make roughly \$200 a month. The private airline Kam Air, which Najmuddin chose for his son, takes up to five bodies per flight free of charge.

After Esa's casket - along with that containing captain Imam - was loaded in the cargo section of the Kam Air flight, and passengers had all boarded the plane, the flight was cancelled due to technical issues.

Arguing vehemently, the passengers returned to the terminal. The caskets, wrapped in Afghan flags, were unloaded to be returned to the freezer. Down the runway, a second flight was going ahead to Kabul. As dozens of soldiers jostled to board the military plane, Najmuddin decided to



A soldier loads Esa's bodies at Kandahar airport
[Mujib Mashal/Al Jazeera]

try once again to convince the military to help him bring his son home.

"I will take the road, just bring the body please," the old man quietly begged the pilot of the military plane as his eyes filled with tears. He couldn't risk transporting his son on the dangerous Kandahar-Kabul highway because Taliban have previously torched corpses of Afghan soldiers, he said. The pilot respectfully listened and then told Najmuddin it wasn't in his protocol to carry dead bodies.

"When we serve, they need us. When we die, they kick us and move on," said a uniformed captain witnessing the scene.

General Azimi says families of the soldiers are paid "about \$2,000" for funeral and burial services, in addition to the salary they were making when they were alive. He said the salary would continue to be paid as a pension to the deceased's family: "If the martyred soldier has a son, until his son is eighteen years old. If he leaves behind a wife, until his wife remarries. And if he has elderly parents as dependents - until the parents pass away."

At least families of three soldiers in the north complained of delays in postmortem salaries.

Laid to rest

When Namjuddin eventually managed to fly the body to Kabul, he received "four dollars less than \$1,500" for the funeral and burial services. The old man had already spent about \$700 on his 44-day search for the body.

The government provided him with a car for the ten-hour drive from Kabul to his village in Takhar.

As village men lifted the casket from the family's mud house and made their way through narrow streets, dozens of crying women and stunned children followed behind them. They made their way to Esa's final resting place on top of a small hill. The black, red, and green Afghan flag that the casket had been wrapped in Kandahar had disappeared.

Esa is survived by his wife and two young children, five brothers and his elderly parents.

