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## Afghanistan's Dirty War: Why the Most Feared Man in Bermal District Is a U.S. Ally

By Julius Cavendish / Kabul  
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On Nov. 30, 2009, in the shadow of mountains that crumple up 9,000-ft. ridges, an Afghan mercenary bankrolled by the U.S. military and hell-bent on the destruction of Taliban rebels allegedly stopped three men heading home to celebrate 'Id ul-Qurban with their families. According to an elder from Bermal, the Afghan district where the incident took place, Commander Azizullah and his men bound their hands. Then, the elder told TIME, Azizullah drew his pistol and shot them. There was no evidence that these men were insurgents, the elder says. "But he killed them anyway."

The story, corroborated almost word for word by an internal U.N. report dated January 2010 and calling for Azizullah's removal from the U.S. payroll, is one of numerous accounts of atrocity laid at his door. As part of a secretive U.S. Army program responsible for some of the most effective fighters in Afghanistan, Azizullah has risen from nothing to command a ferocious 400-man militia of Afghan security guards. Stocky, bearded and seemingly implacable, he's credited with bringing some kind of security to a few square miles of southeastern Afghanistan. "[I've] conducted lots of operations, seen lots of stuff, been blown up by a suicide bomber," he told TIME during a phone call earlier this year. But if testimony from four Afghan sources in Bermal,

two businessmen with interests in Bermal, two Afghan officials and two Western diplomats is to be believed, the cost has been a spate of bloodletting that makes little distinction between enemy combatants and ordinary civilians — despite legislation forbidding U.S. taxpayer dollars from funding units where there is credible evidence of human-rights violations.

The U.N. report cites seven other instances in which Azizullah and his men appear to have overstepped the bounds of their authority. In late September or early October (the Afghan month of Mizan) 2009, they searched a house "belonging to Ahmad Gul" following a clash with insurgents. Gul "was killed in his home along with his brother Omer Khan" and a third person, who had been working the fields nearby. Azizullah strapped "their bodies to the hood of [his] vehicles" and paraded them through the Margha Mandi bazaar — in a country where burial rites hold deep cultural import. "The bodies were kept for eight days until they started to rot," the U.N. report claims. A *maulawi* (a senior cleric) from Bermal gives a similar account, placing the event in early October 2009 and naming the third victim as Mir Nawab, although rather than tilling a field, he says, Nawab was helping Gul build a mud wall. "Witnesses say the Taliban were nowhere near there and the ambush was far away," the *maulawi* told TIME.

In another incident detailed in the U.N. report and corroborated by two independent Afghan sources from Bermal, Azizullah and his men raided a house in Tangarhi village, "killing all nine people there," according to a Waziri elder from the district, who added that the names of three of the victims were Ajab Khan, Salaam and Gul Nawaz. According to the U.N. report, three other victims were children. A former schoolteacher from Bermal tells TIME: "Somebody reported to Azizullah that the house owner had hosted insurgents. That was wrong. His guests had come from Dubai. So Azizullah ... was supposed to arrest and detain the people so he could investigate them. But what he did was open fire." ([See photos of the battle in Kandahar.](#))

There are a dozen similar examples, including a rape, theft and the desecration of a mosque, some related to TIME by terrified villagers during an investigation lasting several months, others painstakingly documented by U.N. officials in two separate internal reports seen by this reporter. "Elders from a number of districts in the area have provided independent accounts of Azizullah's involvement in criminal activities (theft), indiscriminate killings and ... detaining young boys [and] reportedly sexually abus[ing] them," the January 2010 report complains. It identifies Azizullah as "an Afghan Security Guard employed by SOF [special-operations forces]" and recommends that he be stripped of his position. WikiLeaks battlefield reporting also identifies Azizullah as an Afghan security guard.

Meanwhile, an assessment carried out for a reconstruction firm working in the region credits the fear and loathing Azizullah has inspired with driving civilians toward the insurgency. "The presence of Azizullah as the head of militia has led to better security, but the rural population voices serious concerns about the disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force by his men," it says. "People in Pirkuti have joined the Taliban because of Azizullah's atrocities ... Azizullah uses his rapport with the Special Forces to bomb the [Pashtun] areas ... Azizullah's security measures in rural areas have been counterproductive because of his disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force." According to the assessment, "He killed an old woman in Pirkuti because he thought she was the mother of a suspected insurgent ... These acts are amplified by the insurgents to increase disaffection for the state." The concern that U.S. sponsorship of Azizullah is driving civilians toward the insurgency is repeated by a local Afghan analyst. "The Americans are the ones to blame," he says, echoing a pervasive sentiment. "They could stop him, but they don't."

They've certainly had the opportunity. U.N. officials raised their concerns about Azizullah over a year ago. But a NATO spokesman says the organization's informal investigation of their protégé led nowhere. "There was a derogatory report via U.N. channels last summer, but when we tried to research it, there was really little information to substantiate what were essentially claims," Lieut. Colonel John Dorrian, chief of operations at NATO's public-affairs unit in Kabul, told TIME earlier this year. "Thus, no action was taken."

[See TIME's video on fighting in Afghanistan.](#)

That's hardly surprising, say human-rights experts. Getting to the bottom of allegations like these is difficult at the best of times. It took me months to organize meetings with sources from the area and persuade them to speak out. Terrified as they are, villagers are going to be even less likely to complain to the U.S. forces they hold responsible for empowering Azizullah. Exacerbating that, NATO "doesn't bring a great deal of healthy skepticism" to investigations, which might include statements by troops on the ground, a review of video footage or signals intelligence — and not much else, says Erica Gaston, a human-rights lawyer for the Open Society Foundations. "That's not a bad methodology to start out with," says Gaston, "but if you really want to get the whole story on accusations of misconduct — particularly when they involve local warlords — you need to get out and talk to the community. That just isn't how [NATO] investigations work generally."

Meanwhile, a blistering report by Human Rights Watch, published last month, provides credible evidence that far from being the exception, behavior like Azizullah's is commonplace in Afghanistan. It found that militias, many of them created by NATO despite reservations by President Hamid Karzai, are murdering, raping and torturing civilians (including children), extorting illegal taxes and smuggling contraband. In one instance, Afghan paramilitaries allegedly abducted two teenagers and drove nails through the feet of one. The 102-page report titled *Just Don't Call It a Militia* documents how parts of the Afghan establishment and the U.S. military have provided guns and money to paramilitary groups without adequate oversight or accountability. Because of their links to senior Afghan officials or U.S. special-operations forces, many of these groups operate with impunity. ([See how Pakistan's spat highlights the bitter truths facing the U.S. in Afghanistan.](#))

In Azizullah's case, the allegations and the military's response offer an uncomfortable glimpse of the clandestine war that Afghan paramilitaries bankrolled by the U.S. are waging against al-Qaeda and the Taliban — and the lack of accountability they're subject to. The dirty war is "very poorly understood," says Michael Semple, a Harvard fellow and leading expert on Afghanistan, even though it's been "a central part of the strategy for the past decade." A Special Forces captain called Matt, who has served in Afghanistan but has no involvement with Azizullah, described Afghan security guards — which is a generic term — as "the most effective fighting formation in Afghanistan" for the extent of the war. "This is undisputed fact," he said. Yet groups like the Afghan security guards have remained steadfastly off the radar. Semple says that, when he was working on security-sector reform in Afghanistan, it was only "with great difficulty" that you could get the NDS — the country's security service — on to the agenda. As for the private militias run by special forces or the CIA? "Never."

On paper, Azizullah and his Afghan security guards exist to protect Firebase Lilley, a remote outpost in eastern Paktika province that doubles as a listening post for the CIA and a training hub for some of the agency's 3,000 private troops (known as Counterterrorism Pursuit Teams). But the Afghan guards do a bit more than pull guard. Battlefield reporting published by WikiLeaks suggests they act with a degree of autonomy, sometimes running their own missions despite Azizullah's claim that he can't go "10 meters" without a Green Beret in tow. And whatever the degree of oversight he's subject to by his military advisers, even Azizullah accepts that his main job is killing Taliban. "Recently I was injured again when we set an ambush for people firing rockets onto [Firebase Lilley]," he said in his February phone interview with TIME. "When we saw them, we started shooting at each other and I was hurt [along with] Nick, a U.S. special-

forces guy, and a soldier called Shazaman." He also used the interview to deny all allegations of wrongdoing.

"Since the Taliban and al-Qaeda couldn't kill me with their suicide attacks or land mines, they're now using propaganda against me. I have never killed anyone innocent. I'm a very religious person; I respect my religion, so how could I desecrate a mosque or kill a civilian? ... You won't find a single person who can prove that I've done anything you mention, like raping boys, desecrating mosques or killing innocent people." ([See why there is growing doubt about the strategy in Afghanistan.](#))

During the interview, the leader of the U.S. special-forces detachment supporting Azizullah, who called himself Dan, came on the phone. "We've gone a huge way as far as collateral damage and civilian casualties [go]," he said. "That's gone down quite a bit. We have quite a bit of control over our partner's force and ... we do everything we can to [avoid civilian casualties]. There's been really no civilian casualties, at least since I've been here."

Azizullah's relationship with U.S. special forces began soon after the 2001 invasion, when he was one of the first Afghan security guards to sign on. As an ethnic Tajik born and bred in a largely Pashtun area, Azizullah had suffered under the predominantly Pashtun Taliban — and possessed the kind of social geography that may have appealed to his new American mentors. "Right from the early days, the Americans seemed to work with people from that enclave," says Harvard's Semple. Special forces "want to work with people from a minority community that's never going to go over to ... the Haqqanis, that [has an] interest in maintaining the patronage of the outside force."

But if the upside of working with collaborators from Urgan, Azizullah's home district, is that they will never go over to the insurgents, then the downside is that patronage bestowed on them by American forces stirs ethnic jealousies. Friends say Azizullah saw American patronage as a sign that his time had come, and battlefield reporting from 2007 allegedly had him intervening in local business disputes. Analysts, merchants and villagers say the Pashtun majority feels marginalized by what they see as an unfair distribution of the money pouring in, in the shape of contracts from Firebase Lilley. "The perception is [the Tajiks] get all the contracts, all the jobs," one source said. That perceived hoarding of the spoils, and Azizullah's apparent impunity, are paving the way for violent repercussions. "People are so angry with him that when the U.S. Army stops supporting him, his body will be hacked into 1,000 pieces by the people," an acquaintance of Azizullah said. Vengeance will likely be visited on the whole Tajik community.

The shadowy war waged along Afghanistan's eastern border is certainly no place for armchair morality. The conflict "is not pretty," cautions Matt, the Green Beret captain. "It insults our Western morals and perspectives on life, [which are] a modern luxury, born of hundreds of years of vicious fighting and ... not shared by 80% of the world today."

But the allegations of persistent human-rights abuses aren't just embarrassing from a moral perspective. They also showcase the biggest drawbacks of militias — which NATO wants to expand aggressively across Afghanistan in the shape of "Afghan local police," and has made a hallmark of its exit strategy. Critics say that although the plan may temporarily help dent the Taliban, the consequences are too awful to contemplate: resurgent warlords, deepening ethnic tensions, widespread bloodletting and the erosion of what little authority the government in Kabul has left. The cost of some short-term success in the military fight against the Taliban could, over time, become a return to Afghanistan's darkest days.