

CIA death squads killing with “impunity” in Afghanistan

Joe Kay
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A United Nations investigator released a preliminary report last week citing widespread civilian deaths in Afghanistan, often at the hands of unaccountable units led by the CIA or other foreign intelligence agencies.

The investigator is Philip Alston, a New York University professor serving as the Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Human Rights Council on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary execution. His report provides a partial glimpse into the illegal actions of intelligence agencies, occupying forces, and Afghan police, as they seek to repress opposition to the US-led occupation and US-backed government.

A more detailed final report will be released later this year.

Alston focused on civilian killings by US and other international military forces, citing 200 reported deaths in the first four months of 2008. This figure, however, was based on tabulations by the United Nations and other international organizations, and is undoubtedly a serious underestimation.

In addition to civilians killed in air raids—often targeted indiscriminately at civilian dwellings—Alston reported on “a number of raids for which no state or military command appears ready to acknowledge responsibility.”

In a press conference on Thursday, Alston elaborated, saying, “I have spoken with a large number of people in relation to the operation of foreign intelligence units. I don’t want to name them but they are the most senior level of the relevant places. These forces operate with what appears to be impunity.” The location of the incidents cited in the report indicate that the intelligence agencies in question include the CIA or US Special Operations Forces.

The report cited a few incidents as examples of extrajudicial killings. In January 2008, two brothers were

killed in Kandahar province in a raid led by “international personnel.” Alston found that the victims “are widely acknowledged, even by well-informed Government officials, to have had no connection to the Taliban, and the circumstances of their deaths are suspicious. However, not only was I unable to get any international military commander to provide their version of what took place, but I was unable to get any international military commander to even admit that their soldiers were involved.”

Other incidents involved raids by Afghans led by unnamed “international intelligence services” out of bases in both Kandahar and Nangarhar provinces.

“It is absolutely unacceptable for heavily-armed internationals accompanied by heavily-armed Afghan forces to be wandering around conducting dangerous raids that too often result in killings without anyone taking responsibility for them,” the report stated.

The British *Independent* newspaper provided some additional information. It noted, “A Western official close to the investigation said the secret units are still known as Campaign Forces, from the time when American Special Forces and CIA spies recruited Afghan troops to help overthrow the Taliban during the US-led invasion in 2001. ‘The brightest, smartest guys in these militias were kept on,’ the official said. ‘They were trained and rearmed and they are still being used.’”

The *Independent* went on to cite one incident involving British forces. “In Helmand, where most of Britain’s 7,800 troops are based, Special Forces were accused of slitting a man’s throat in a botched night raid last year. Security sources now claim the operation was mounted by a secret spy unit.”

Alston also reported on the actions of Afghan police. “They function not as enforcers of law and order, but as

promoters of the interests of a specific tribe or commander,” he reported. He cited one incident in which Afghan police massacred a group from a rival tribe. There was no investigation by the government or the occupying forces. In another incident, police killed nine and wounded 42 unarmed protestors in Sheberghan in May 2007.

In general, he found little to no interest among US or Afghan officials in monitoring or following up on civilian deaths. “The level of complacency in response to these killings is staggeringly high,” he said.

At the press conference, he noted, “When I asked for the number of reported civilian casualties over the past year or so, I was told that those figures are either not available in Afghanistan—which I was told by several senior military people—or that they are secret and cannot be provided to me. When I asked for the results of certain cases, to ascertain whether those involved have been punished, I was told that no such information is available here in Afghanistan and that perhaps I should read the newspapers of the countries concerned.”

The fact that the CIA is involved in covert operations in Afghanistan is neither new nor surprising. Already by the 1970s, the CIA had developed ties to sections of the Afghan population, and in particular Islamic fundamentalist elements, in an effort to undermine the Soviet-backed government. Later, the CIA was heavily involved in developing ties to anti-Taliban warlords prior to the US invasion and occupation in 2001.

Following the invasion, Afghanistan—and in particular the Bagram Air Force Base near Kabul—became a transit point for prisoners captured by the United States and destined for Guantánamo Bay, secret CIA prisons, or US-allied countries that practice torture. US intelligence agencies were reportedly also involved in the interrogation of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

In 2005, US media reported on the operations of US-backed death squads in Iraq, deployed to kill suspected opponents of the US occupation. Yasser Salihee, a special correspondent for news agency Knight Ridder who was investigating the death squads, was killed with a bullet to the head in June of that year. Separate reports related how the US military had modeled Iraqi units on the death squads deployed in Central America during the 1980s to eliminate left-wing opposition to

US policies.

While most of the CIA’s actions remain shrouded in secrecy, one CIA contractor was prosecuted for torturing an Afghan prisoner to death in 2003. The contractor, David Passaro, interrogated and beat the prisoner, Abdul Wali, for two days, injuring him so severely that he died two days later.

In a separate development, the *New York Times* reported on Saturday that the Pentagon is moving forward with the construction of a 40-acre prison complex at the Bagram military base. The current prison, as well as separate prisons run by the Afghans and by the US, are reportedly insufficient to hold the massive number of individuals swept up by the occupying forces.

The facility may also be used for prisoners currently detained in Guantánamo Bay. It will be designed to hold as many as 1,100 people.



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