

Afghanistan news round up w/e March 23 2012 By Caroline Cameron, Great North News Services

The price of a life in Afghanistan? It all depends....

IN Afghanistan, if NATO forces kill a member of your family, it is better in terms of money if they come from Germany or Italy than the US or Britain. If like Shah Mahmood you die to save a school, you'll get even less from your own government.

In the cold calculation of how much to pay for victims of the decade-old war, British forces have doled out as little as \$210, while German forces have paid as much as \$25,000, according to a study by the human rights NGO CIVIC.

Civilian casualties caused by NATO forces hunting insurgents are a major source of friction between the Afghan government and its Western backers - all the more so after a lone US soldier gunned down 16 Afghan villagers at the weekend.

"They have to ask themselves the question how much is one's life worth? You can't put a price on it," Rafi Nabi, 33 and unemployed, said in a market in the Afghan capital.

"If one were to kill an American and offer to compensate their death with money, they wouldn't accept it."

It was unclear if the United States intends to pay reparations to the families of 16 people suspected to have been killed by the US staff sergeant in a remote area of the southern province of Kandahar, the traditional Taliban stronghold. Eleven victims were said to come from one family.

The United States usually pays up to \$2,500 for civilians killed in lawful operations such as air strikes, according to an investigation by CIVIC, a rights advocacy group. The study, compiled two years ago, has been regularly updated.

"The shooter clearly violated the laws of war, human rights law and the US military code of justice. In these type of situations, we call for accountability and justice as well as compensation for harm done," Trevor Keck, an investigator with CIVIC, told Reuters in an email.

British forces have paid out between \$210 and \$7,000 while German troops provided \$20,000 in cash and a car worth \$5,000 after shooting three people at a checkpoint in 2008, the report said. In 2009, Italy disbursed \$13,500 to the family of a 14-year-old girl who was shot dead, it said.

A series of incidents over the past month, including the burning of Korans at a NATO base and the massacre in southern Afghanistan, have stirred debate about the withdrawal timetable for foreign troops, with some asking for a faster pullout.

HEIGHTENED TENSIONS

The blunders have also heightened tensions between Kabul and Washington at a time when the United States is in delicate talks with Afghanistan over its future presence after most combat troops pull out at the end of 2014.

Based on interviews with NATO and Afghan civilians, CIVIC found that compensation payments plus an apology were key to lowering hostility toward foreign troops in Afghanistan, now at a peak again over the Koran burnings and the shootings.

There is no standard mechanism for Afghans to report civilian casualties, much less seek compensation, reducing both the hope of redress and any sense that justice is being done.

Rules often require even illiterate villagers to decipher which unit came to their home and then go to its main base - sometimes hundreds of km away down unsafe roads. And to complicate matters, most villagers do not readily distinguish between foreign troops from different countries.

As the war drags on into its 11th year, security forces battling the militants killed 410 civilians in 2011, a drop of 4 percent from 2010, the United Nations said, with the total number of civilians killed last year exceeding 3,000.

"The Americans have seen that the Afghan people are poor and desperate. If a woman loses her husband, she needs money to sustain her living. What else can they do? They have no power," said film maker Maroof Nazir, 27.

"Will the government hear their voices or help them? No. When you have no power, you're forced to take the money and say thank you to the same people who killed your families, what else can you do?"

Report says Bin Laden was plotting Obama's assassination

A MAJOR US newspaper reports Osama bin Laden ordered al-Qaida to assassinate US President Barack Obama and General David Petraeus, who was then the top US commander in Afghanistan.

Washington Post columnist David Ignatius reported Friday documents taken from bin Laden's compound describe the scheme. Bin Laden wrote that killing Obama would ensure Vice President Joe Biden would come to power, someone bin Laden said was "totally unprepared" for the post.

Bin Laden suggested Pakistani terrorist Ilyas Kashmiri carry out the attack against the US

president. Kashmiri was killed in a US drone strike last June.

US officials and analysts say there is no evidence al-Qaida was anywhere near ready to mount the proposed attacks.

US special commandos killed bin Laden in a covert raid on his house in the Pakistani garrison town of Abbottabad last May 2. The assault team also confiscated a wealth of material, including video clips and personal correspondence of the al-Qaida leader. One CIA official called it "the largest trove of information ever captured from a senior terrorist leader,"

and said the material offered "important insights" into al-Qaida's operations. Ignatius said the bin Laden documents will soon be available publicly.

The Washington Post writer says in the documents he reviewed, bin Laden called for his deputies to focus their energy on attacks within the US instead of on U.S. targets in Iraq and Afghanistan. He says bin Laden also wrote about "mistakes" and "miscalculations" his terrorist organization had made, including being responsible for killing fellow Muslims, which he said had tarnished the organization's image in the Muslim world.

Hero guard gives life to defend Afghan schools

WHILE media attention was focused on the aftermath of the Koran burning in Afghanistan last month, a story that otherwise would have made headlines everywhere went virtually unnoticed.

It's the story of Shah Mahmood, a young Afghan from war-ravaged Helmand Province in Southern Afghanistan who saved a school by giving his life.

Shah Mahmood was apparently doing his routine duty of guarding two schools in the Dasht area of Helmand's capital, Lashkar Gah, when two men appeared with explosives and an intent to blow up the schools. Mohammad resisted but was severely beaten by the two armed men.

The official Kandahar media office's press release had more details:

"Leaving him unconscious and thinking that Shah Mahmood was dead, the terrorists started to plant land mines inside the school building. However, Shah Mahmood stood up and opened fire on the men with his gun killing one and wounding the other."

Shah Mahmood and the wounded attacker were later taken to a Lashkar Gah emergency room. "Unfortunately Shah Mohammad, as a result of the severe beating [at the hands] of the Taliban, died there," the press release added.

Insurgents have been blowing up schools across Afghanistan because they think the students are taught Western and un-Islamic values and lessons. Southern Afghanistan is considered a stronghold of the Taliban, so few schools are open in that region. Sensing that the situation had gotten out of control, the Afghan government reached a deal with the Taliban, according

to Kabul-based research organization Afghan Analysts Network.

Amid this all, a young Afghan sacrificed his life to save these schools, a seemingly rare story of proud defiance against violent extremism.

To highlight the issue and encourage media coverage, I started a Facebook Group for Shah Mahmood. It was flooded with comments. They include: "Shah Mahmood, we are proud of you," "Shah Mahmood, you are the real hero of Afghan people," and, "Shah Mahmood's principle was patriotism and he proved that."

The group's members eventually asked the Afghan government to do the following:

Name a Helmand city square, a road, and one of the schools after Shah Mahmood

Inaugurate an educational award in Shah Mahmood's name

Provide care for Shah Mahmood's family and ensure their safety and education

The Facebook campaign attracted international attention. Shah Mahmood was described by his father and other relatives as a kind and generous man who was engaged and trying to bring his bride home soon.

Since the tragedy, Shah Mahmood's family of 19 has moved to the city of Lashkar Gah; but his father says they don't even have money for rent.

Now, BBC's Pashto service has quoted Afghanistan's education minister, Dr Farooq Wardak, as saying that President Hamid Karzai issued personal instructions to the government to continue to pay Shah Mahmood's salary to his grieving family. As well, Wardak said, one of the schools will be renamed from Shamsul-Uloom to Shah Mahmood to honour the man who gave his life to save the school and its students.

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