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Night Raids Curbing Taliban, but Afghans Cite Civilian Toll

By **CARLOTTA GALL**

KABUL, Afghanistan — [United States Special Operations forces](#) have carried out an extraordinary number of night raids over the past year, turning them into one of their most effective tools against the insurgents even as they stir accusations of abuse, resentment among Afghans and divisions with the government.

Last year's influx of coalition forces brought with it the kind of intelligence and surveillance that have enhanced the military's ability to conduct the night raids, which now average 300 a month, NATO and Afghan officials said. Hundreds of people have been killed and thousands detained in the raids over the past 18 months, they said.

There is no doubt that the raids have been devastating to the [Taliban](#) insurgency. Afghan officials and community elders in almost every frontline province say that known Taliban commanders and even whole groups of fighters have been killed or captured, and that the raids have forced the Taliban to operate in smaller cells and have shrunk their capacity.

Military officials say the campaign has disrupted whole insurgent networks in rural districts and along infiltration routes, thereby reducing large-scale attacks in the cities.

"Those night raids have broken the back of the Taliban," said Abdul Satar Mirzokhel, deputy governor of Helmand Province for three years until this spring. "Most of their targets were very precise, aimed at the right people in the right places. If there were mistakes, they were very few."

Yet complaints from Afghans persist about the raids, which are almost invariably carried out under a veil of secrecy by Special Operations forces, often accompanied by Afghan commandos. The raids remain one of the greatest sources of contention with President [Hamid Karzai](#), who has shown growing signs of distress over their use and has repeatedly called for them to end.

Gen. [David H. Petraeus](#), the commander of coalition forces in [Afghanistan](#), has defended the raids in sometimes heated exchanges with Mr. Karzai. In May, apparently in recognition of the anger the raids had provoked, General Petraeus ordered reviews of all tactical guidance for coalition troops and the causes of civilian casualties, and later of the conduct of night operations.

But neither General Petraeus, who has overseen a steep increase in the use of the raids since taking command about a year ago, nor his successor is unlikely to slow the pace of the raids. If anything, the military's dependence on the night raids, which use relatively small teams of Special Forces, may only increase as the United States reduces its troops over the next three years.

Accounts of the raids from the military and Afghan civilians often differ widely. In one example, family members and an Afghan investigator said that two clerics were among eight civilians killed in a raid last November by American Special Operations forces in Mian, a village in a remote district of the southern province of Kandahar.

Muhammad Younus, 60, said in an interview that he was so badly beaten by American soldiers that he could not walk for 20 days. Villagers carried him out in a wheelbarrow and took him the next morning to see the bodies of his two brothers, the clerics: Maulavi Abdul Kabir, 72, and Maulavi Abdul Rauf, 65.

They had been burned so badly, they were barely recognizable, and they bore bullet wounds, he said.

Lt. Cmdr. Ron Flesvig, a spokesman for the International Security Assistance Force, confirmed the raid and that eight people had been killed. He forwarded comments from the Special Operations public affairs office, dismissing the allegations as "unfounded and without merit."

An investigation "was unable to locate anyone who could or would provide a name of any civilian alleged to have been wounded or killed during the operation," the public affairs office statement said.

The American forces' actions in Mian over a 24-hour period nonetheless incensed the wider community and raised questions about the veracity of the military's reporting.

Military officials say that they get their target 80 percent of the time, and that less than 1 percent of the raids lead to civilian casualties. Yet there is no way to independently verify

those figures, since the raids are conducted in great secrecy and are underreported. Any investigations by the military into the raids are not made public.

The United Nations examined a number of night raids from 2010 in four districts in Kandahar, where the insurgency was intense. Elders and local Afghans said the raids were generally precise and caused fewer civilian casualties than before, according to Georgette Gagnon, director of the human rights unit of the [United Nations mission in Afghanistan](#).

But the mission also noted in its 2010 annual report that “excessive use of force, ill treatment, death and injury to civilians and damage to property has occurred in some cases involving Special Forces.”

The method of the raids, especially the forced entry of houses and invasion of women’s quarters, let alone killing of women, is deeply offensive culturally to Afghans. Although coalition forces say most raids are conducted using a “soft knock” — calling by loudspeaker for people to come out — there are still numerous accounts of forced entry and cases of men being shot in their beds next to their wives.

The raids and attendant sweeping arrests have become the primary complaint of rural communities, human rights officials say. When Lt. Col. Aziz Ahmad took up a new job as police chief of Shah Joy District in the southeastern province of Zabul, townspeople asked immediately what he could do to stop the night raids.

Just two weeks earlier American forces had raided the house of a Taliban member at night and killed him and his wife, leaving four small children alone. “We are trying to find relatives to take care of them,” the police chief said.

“It turns people against the government and the foreign forces,” he said.

Erica Gaston of the Open Society Institute, who is compiling a new report on night raids, said that while in general night raids had become more accurate, and that the conduct of forces had improved, she still encountered cases of unarmed people being shot in the head, or being shot when doing things like picking up a cellphone, running away or rushing to help a wounded relative.

“People in the villages are more scared of the Americans than of the Taliban because of these raids,” said Gul Badshah Majidi, a legislator from the eastern province of Paktia. In Zabul Province, to the south, the Afghan Army commander, Gen. Jamaluddin Sayed, said that one of the reasons villagers were joining the local police program was not just to keep the Taliban out, but also to prevent raids on their houses.

NATO officials have dismissed many of the allegations from Afghans as Taliban propaganda. They cite cases of Taliban members ordering local elders to call officials and even President Karzai with fictitious reports of civilian casualties.

But the military is intent on mitigating political fallout and training Afghans to take over leadership of the raids.

The task of reviewing the raids and civilian casualties was given to Maj. Gen. John W. Nicholson, deputy chief of staff for operations in Afghanistan, who said that coalition forces were already revising procedures and retraining troops. On night operations they are now using Afghan soldiers to call people out of their homes, and female soldiers to safeguard women and children, he said.

There was no sign of such practices during the raid by Special Operations forces and Afghan forces in late November in Mian.

The American and Afghan forces arrived by helicopters at 11 p.m. and stayed for 24 hours, detaining all the men in one house and interrogating and beating a number of them, people in the village said.

“Before they asked me a question, they started kicking and beating me,” Mr. Younus, the 60-year-old, said, adding that Americans did the beating and interrogation.

Mr. Younus, a diabetic who walks with a cane, said he was beaten on and off through the night and fainted four times. “Don’t tell us about your sickness, we are going to kill you and your brothers and destroy your houses,” he recalls being told through a translator.

An adviser minister to President Karzai on tribal affairs, Muhammad Siddique Aziz, who headed the Afghan investigation into the episode, said that none of those killed had been Taliban and that he had had bitter discussions with an American Special Forces general over his findings.

“We told him that the activities you are doing are not in the interest of you nor of the Karzai government,” he said. “Whoever did this raid, why do they have to kill people? Why did they not just arrest them?”

