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Night Raids, Hidden Detention Centers, the “Black Jail,” and the Dogs of War in Afghanistan

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One quiet, wintry night last year in the eastern Afghan town of Khost, a young government employee named Ismatullah simply vanished. He had last been seen in the town's bazaar with a group of friends. Family members scoured Khost's dust-doused streets for days. Village elders contacted Taliban commanders in the area who were wont to kidnap government workers, but they had never heard of the young man. Even the governor got involved, ordering his police to round up nettlesome criminal gangs that sometimes preyed on young bazaar-goers for ransom.

But the hunt turned up nothing. Spring and summer came and went with no sign of Ismatullah. Then one day, long after the police and village elders had abandoned their search, a courier delivered a neat, handwritten note on Red Cross stationery to the family. In it, Ismatullah informed them that he was in Bagram, an American prison more than 200 miles away. U.S. forces had picked him up while he was on his way home from the bazaar, the terse letter stated, and he didn't know when he would be freed.

Sometime in the last few years, Pashtun villagers in Afghanistan's rugged heartland began to lose faith in the American project. Many of them can point to the precise moment of this transformation, and it usually took place in the dead of the night, when most of the country was fast asleep. In the secretive U.S. detentions process, suspects are usually nabbed in the darkness and then sent to one of a number of detention areas on military bases, often on the slightest suspicion and without the knowledge of their families.

This process has become even more feared and hated in Afghanistan than coalition airstrikes. The night raids and detentions, little known or understood outside of these Pashtun villages, are slowly turning Afghans against the very forces they greeted as liberators just a few years ago.

One Dark Night in November

It was the 19th of November 2009, at 3:15 am. A loud blast awoke the villagers of a leafy neighborhood outside Ghazni city, a town of ancient provenance in the country's south. A team of U.S. soldiers burst through the front gate of the home of Majidullah Qarar, the spokesman for the Minister of Agriculture. Qarar was in Kabul at the time, but his relatives were home, four of whom were sleeping in the family's one-room guesthouse. One of them, Hamidullah, who sold carrots at the local bazaar, ran towards the door of the guesthouse. He was immediately shot, but managed to crawl back inside, leaving a trail of blood behind him. Then Azim, a baker, darted towards his injured cousin. He, too, was shot and crumpled to the floor. The fallen men cried out to the two relatives remaining in the room, but they -- both children -- refused to move, glued to their beds in silent horror.

The foreign soldiers, most of them tattooed and bearded, then went on to the main compound. They threw clothes on the floor, smashed dinner plates, and forced open closets. Finally, they found the man they were looking for: Habib-ur-Rahman, a computer programmer and government employee. Rahman was responsible for converting Microsoft Windows from English to the local Pashto language so that government offices could use the software. He had spent time in Kuwait, and the Afghan translator accompanying the soldiers said they were acting on a tip that Rahman was a member of al-Qaeda.

They took the barefoot Rahman and a cousin of his to a helicopter some distance away and transported them to a small American base in a neighboring province for interrogation. After two days, U.S. forces released Rahman's cousin. But Rahman has not been seen or heard from since.

"We've called his phone, but it doesn't answer," says his cousin Qarar, the spokesman for the agriculture minister. Using his powerful connections, Qarar enlisted local police, parliamentarians, the governor, and even the agriculture minister himself in the search for his cousin, but they turned up nothing. Government officials who independently investigated the

scene in the aftermath of the raid and corroborated the claims of the family also pressed for an answer as to why two of Qarar's family members were killed. American forces issued a statement saying that the dead were "enemy militants [that] demonstrated hostile intent."

Weeks after the raid, the family remains bitter. "Everyone in the area knew we were a family that worked for the government," Qarar says. "Rahman couldn't even leave the city because if the Taliban caught him in the countryside they would have killed him."

Beyond the question of Rahman's guilt or innocence, however, it's how he was taken that has left such a residue of hate and anger among his family. "Did they have to kill my cousins? Did they have to destroy our house?" Qarar asks. "They knew where Rahman worked. Couldn't they have at least tried to come with a warrant in the daytime? We would have forced Rahman to comply."

"I used to go on TV and argue that people should support this government and the foreigners," he adds. "But I was wrong. Why should anyone do so? I don't care if I get fired for saying it, but that's the truth."

The Dogs of War

Night raids are only the first step in the American detention process in Afghanistan. Suspects are usually sent to one among a series of prisons on U.S. military bases around the country. There are officially nine such jails, called Field Detention Sites in military parlance. They are small holding areas, often just a clutch of cells divided by plywood, and are mainly used for prisoner interrogation.

In the early years of the war, these were but way stations for those en route to Bagram prison, a facility with a notorious reputation for abusive behavior. As a spotlight of international attention fell on Bagram in recent years, wardens there cleaned up their act and the mistreatment of prisoners began to shift to the little-noticed Field Detention Sites.

Of the 24 former detainees interviewed for this story, 17 claim to have been abused at or en

route to these sites. Doctors, government officials, and the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, a body tasked with investigating abuse claims, corroborate 12 of these claims.

One of these former detainees is Noor Agha Sher Khan, who used to be a police officer in Gardez, a mud-caked town in the eastern part of the country. According to Sher Khan, U.S. forces detained him in a night raid in 2003 and brought him to a Field Detention Site at a nearby U.S. base. "They interrogated me the whole night," he recalls, "but I had nothing to tell them." Sher Khan worked for a police commander whom U.S. forces had detained on suspicion of having ties to the insurgency. He had occasionally acted as a driver for this commander, which made him suspicious in American eyes.

The interrogators blindfolded him, taped his mouth shut, and chained him to the ceiling, he alleges. Occasionally they unleashed a dog, which repeatedly bit him. At one point, they removed the blindfold and forced him to kneel on a long wooden bar. "They tied my hands to a pulley [above] and pushed me back and forth as the bar rolled across my shins. I screamed and screamed." They then pushed him to the ground and forced him to swallow 12 bottles worth of water. "Two people held my mouth open and they poured water down my throat until my stomach was full and I became unconscious. It was as if someone had inflated me," he says. After he was roused from his torpor, he vomited the water uncontrollably.

This continued for a number of days; sometimes he was hung upside down from the ceiling, and other times blindfolded for extended periods. Eventually, he was sent on to Bagram where the torture ceased. Four months later, he was quietly released, with a letter of apology from U.S. authorities for wrongfully imprisoning him.

An investigation of Sher Khan's case by the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission and an independent doctor found that he had wounds consistent with the abusive treatment he alleges. U.S. forces have declined to comment on the specifics of his case, but a spokesman said that some soldiers involved in detentions in this part of the country had been given unspecified "administrative punishments." He added that "all detainees are treated humanely," except for isolated cases.

The Disappeared

Some of those taken to the Field Detention Sites never make it to Bagram, but instead are simply released after authorities deem them to be innocuous. Even then, some allege abuse. Such was the case with Hajji Ehsanullah, snatched one winter night in 2008 from his home in the southern province of Zabul. He was taken to a detention site in Khost Province, some 200 miles away. He returned home 13 days later, his skin scarred by dog bites and with memory difficulties that, according to his doctor, resulted from a blow to the head. U.S. forces had dropped him off at a gas station in Khost after three days of interrogation. It took him ten more days to find his way home.

Others taken to these sites never end up in Bagram for an entirely different reason. In the hardscrabble villages of the Pashtun south, where rumors grow more abundantly than the most bountiful crop, locals whisper tales of people who were captured and executed. Most have no evidence. But occasionally, a body turns up. Such was the case at a detention site on an American military base in Helmand province, where in 2003 a U.S. military coroner wrote in the autopsy report of a detainee who died in U.S. custody (later made available through the Freedom of Information Act): "Death caused by the multiple blunt force injuries to the lower torso and legs complicated by rhabdomyolysis (release of toxic byproducts into the system due to destruction of muscle). Manner of death is homicide."

In the dust-swept province of Khost one day this past December, U.S. forces launched a night raid on the village of Motai, killing six people and capturing nine, according to nearly a dozen local government authorities and witnesses. Two days later, the bodies of two of those detained -- plastic cuffs binding their hands -- were found more than a mile from the largest U.S. base in the area. A U.S. military spokesman denies any involvement in the deaths and declines to comment on the details of the raid. Local Afghan officials and tribal elders, however, steadfastly maintain that the two were killed while in U.S. custody. American authorities released four other villagers in subsequent days. The fate of the three remaining captives is unknown.

The matter might be cleared up if the U.S. military were less secretive about its detention process. But secrecy has been the order of the day. The nine Field Detention Sites are enveloped in a blanket of official secrecy, but at least the Red Cross and other humanitarian organizations are aware of them. There may, however, be others whose existences on the scores of military bases that dot the country have not been disclosed. One example, according to former detainees, is the detention facility at Rish Khor, an Afghan army base that sits atop a mountain overlooking the capital, Kabul.

One night last year, U.S. forces raided Zaiwalat, a tiny village that fits snugly into the mountains of Wardak Province, a few dozen miles west of Kabul, and netted nine locals. They brought the

captives to Rish Khor and interrogated them for three days. "They kept us in a container," recalls Rehmatullah Muhammad, one of the nine. "It was made of steel. We were handcuffed for three days continuously. We barely slept those days." The plain-clothed interrogators accused Rehmatullah and the others of giving food and shelter to the Taliban. The suspects were then sent on to Bagram and released after four months. (A number of former detainees said they were interrogated by plainclothed officials, but they did not know if these officials belonged to the military, the CIA, or private contractors.)

Afghan human rights campaigners worry that U.S. forces may be using secret detention sites like Rish Khor to carry out interrogations away from prying eyes. The U.S. military, however, denies even having knowledge of the facility.

The Black Jail

Much less secret is the final stop for most captives: the Bagram Internment Facility. These days ominously dubbed "Obama's Guantanamo," Bagram nonetheless offers the best conditions for captives during the entire detention process.

Its modern life as a prison began in 2002, when small numbers of detainees from throughout Asia were incarcerated there on the first leg of an odyssey that would eventually bring them to the U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. In the years since, however, it has become the main destination for those caught within Afghanistan as part of the growing war there. By 2009, the inmate population had swelled to more than 700. Housed in a windowless old Soviet hangar, the prison consists of two rows of serried cage-like cells bathed continuously in white light. Guards walk along a platform that runs across the mesh-tops of the pens, an easy position from which to supervise the prisoners below.

Regular, even infamous, abuse in the style of Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison marked Bagram's early years. Abdullah Mujahed, for example, was apprehended in the village of Kar Marchi in the eastern province of Paktia in 2003. Mujahed was a Tajik militia commander who had led an armed uprising against the Taliban in their waning days, but U.S. forces accused him of having ties to the insurgency. "In Bagram, we were handcuffed, blindfolded, and had our feet chained for days," he recalls. "They didn't allow us to sleep at all for 13 days and nights." A guard would strike his legs every time he dozed off. Daily, he could hear the screams of tortured inmates and the unmistakable sound of shackles dragging across the floor.

Then, one day, a team of soldiers dragged him to an aircraft, but refused to tell him where he was going. Eventually he landed at another prison, where the air felt thick and wet. As he walked through the row of cages, inmates began to shout, "This is Guantanamo! You are in Guantanamo!" He would learn there that he was accused of leading the Pakistani Islamist group Lashkar-e-Taiba (which in reality was led by another person who had the same name and who died in 2006). The U.S. eventually released him and returned him to Afghanistan.

Former Bagram detainees allege that they were regularly beaten, subjected to blaring music 24 hours a day, prevented from sleeping, stripped naked, and forced to assume what interrogators term "stress positions." The nadir came in late 2002 when interrogators beat two inmates to death.

The U.S. Special Forces also run a second, secret prison somewhere on Bagram Air Base that the Red Cross still does not have access to. Used primarily for interrogations, it is so feared by prisoners that they have dubbed it the "Black Jail."

One day two years ago, U.S. forces came to get Noor Muhammad, outside of the town of Kajaki in the southern province of Helmand. Muhammad, a physician, was running a clinic that served all comers -- including the Taliban. The soldiers raided his clinic and his home, killing five people (including two patients) and detaining both his father and him. The next day, villagers found the handcuffed corpse of Muhammad's father, apparently dead from a gunshot.

The soldiers took Muhammad to the Black Jail. "It was a tiny, narrow corridor, with lots of cells on both sides and a big steel gate and bright lights. We didn't know when it was night and when it was day." He was held in a concrete, windowless room, in complete solitary confinement. Soldiers regularly dragged him by his neck, and refused him food and water. They accused him of providing medical care to the insurgents, to which he replied, "I am a doctor. It's my duty to provide care to every human being who comes to my clinic, whether they are Taliban or from the government."

Eventually, Muhammad was released, but he has since closed his clinic and left his home village. "I am scared of the Americans and the Taliban," he says. "I'm happy my father is dead, so he doesn't have to experience this hell."

Afraid of the Dark

Unlike the Black Jail, U.S. officials have, in the last two years, moved to reform the main prison at Bagram. Torture there has stopped, and American prison officials now boast that the typical inmate gains 15 pounds while in custody. Sometime in the early months of this year, officials plan to open a dazzling new prison -- that will eventually replace Bagram -- with huge, airy cells, the latest medical equipment, and rooms for vocational training. The Bagram prison itself will be handed over to the Afghans in the coming year, although the rest of the detention process will remain in U.S. hands.

But human rights advocates say that concerns about the detention process still remain. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 2008 that inmates at Guantanamo cannot be stripped of their right to *habeas corpus*, but stopped short of making the same argument for Bagram. (U.S. officials say that Bagram is in the midst of a war zone and therefore U.S. domestic civil rights legislation does not apply.) Unlike Guantanamo, inmates there do not have access to a lawyer. Most say they have no idea why they have been detained. Inmates do now appear before a review panel every six months, which is intended to reassess their detention, but their ability to ask questions about their situation is limited. "I was only allowed to answer yes or no and not explain anything at my hearing," says Rehmatullah Muhammad.

Nonetheless, the improvement in Bagram's conditions begs the question: Can the U.S. fight a cleaner war? This is what Afghan war commander General Stanley McChrystal promised this summer: fewer civilian casualties, fewer of the feared house raids, and a more transparent detention process.

The American troops that operate under NATO command have begun to enforce stricter rules of engagement: they may now officially hold detainees for only 96 hours before transferring them to the Afghan authorities or freeing them, and Afghan forces must take the lead in house searches. American soldiers, when questioned, bristle at these restrictions -- and have ways of circumventing them. "Sometimes we detain people, then, when the 96 hours are up, we transfer them to the Afghans," says one U.S. Marine, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "They rough them up a bit for us and then send them back to us for another 96 hours. This keeps going until we get what we want."

A simpler way of dancing around the rules is to call in the U.S. Special Operations Forces -- the Navy SEALs, Green Berets, and others -- which are not under NATO command and so are not

bound by the stricter rules of engagement. These elite troops are behind most of the night raids and detentions in the search for “high-value suspects.” U.S. military officials say in interviews that the new restrictions have not affected the number of raids and detentions at all. The actual change, however, is more subtle: the detention process has shifted almost entirely to areas and actors that can best avoid public scrutiny: Special Operations Forces and small field prisons.

The shift signals a deeper reality of war, American soldiers say: you can't fight guerrillas without invasive raids and detentions, any more than you could fight them without bullets. Through the eyes of a U.S. soldier, Afghanistan is a scary place. The men are bearded and turbaned. They pray incessantly. In most of the country, women are barred from leaving the house. Many Afghans own a Kalashnikov. “You can't trust anyone,” says Rodrigo Arias, a Marine based in the northeastern province of Kunar. “I've nearly been killed in ambushes but the villagers don't tell us anything. But they usually know something.”

An officer who has worked in the Field Detention Sites says that it takes dozens of raids to turn up a useful suspect. “Sometimes you've got to bust down doors. Sometimes you've got to twist arms. You have to cast a wide net, but when you get the right person it makes all the difference.”

For Arias, it's a matter of survival. “I want to go home in one piece. If that means rounding people up, then round them up.” To question this, he says, is to question whether the war itself is worth fighting. “That's not my job. The people in Washington can figure that out.”

If night raids and detentions are an unavoidable part of modern counterinsurgency warfare, then so is the resentment they breed. “We were all happy when the Americans first came. We thought they would bring peace and stability,” says former detainee Rehmatullah. “But now most people in my village want them to leave.” A year after Rehmatullah was released, his nephew was taken. Two months later, some other villagers were grabbed.

It has become a predictable pattern: Taliban forces ambush American convoys as they pass through the village, and then retreat into the thick fruit orchards that cover the area. The Americans then return at night to pick up suspects. In the last two years, 16 people have been taken and 10 killed in night raids in this single village of about 300, according to villagers. In the same period, they say, the insurgents killed one local and did not take anyone hostage.

The people of this village therefore have begun to fear the night raids more than the Taliban. There are now nights when Rehmatullah's children hear the distant thrum of a helicopter and rush into his room. He consoles them, but admits he needs solace himself. "I know I should be too old for it," he says, "but this war has made me afraid of the dark."

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His dispatches can be read at anandgopal.com. He is currently working on a book about the Afghan war. This piece appears in print in the latest issue of

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To catch him in an audio interview with TomDispatch's Timothy MacBain discussing how he got this story, click

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