

From [Democracy Now](#) | Original Article

The United States is marking the 14th anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks today. Three weeks after the World Trade Center and Pentagon were attacked, the U.S. launched airstrikes in Afghanistan, beginning what would become the longest war in American history. The U.S. military recently reopened a criminal investigation into some of the most serious allegations against U.S. forces in Afghanistan since 2001 involving the murder of at least 17 Afghan men in Wardak province, west of Kabul, in 2012 and 2013. Eight Afghans were killed during U.S. military operations, while several disappeared after having been arrested by Special Forces in Nerkh. Their bodies were later uncovered just outside the U.S. base in the area. Afghan military investigators had concluded at the time that a U.S. Special Forces unit known as the A-Team was responsible. The U.S. military command in Afghanistan conducted multiple investigations, each of which exonerated the unit. We speak to reporter Matthieu Aikins and air excerpts of his interview with an Afghan man detained by the U.S. military.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: The United States is marking the 14th anniversary of the September 11th attacks today. Three weeks after the World Trade Center and Pentagon were attacked, the U.S. launched airstrikes in Afghanistan, beginning what would become the longest war in American history. The U.S. military recently reopened a criminal investigation into some of the most serious allegations against U.S. forces in Afghanistan since 2001 involving the murder of at least 17 Afghan men in Wardak province, west of Kabul, in 2012 and 2013. Eight Afghans were killed during U.S. military operations, while several disappeared after having been arrested by Special Forces in Nerkh. Their bodies were later uncovered just outside the U.S. base in the area. Afghan military investigators had concluded at the time that a U.S. Special Forces unit known as the A-Team was responsible. The U.S. military command in Afghanistan conducted multiple investigations, each of which exonerated the unit.

AMY GOODMAN: For the first time, one of the Afghan men detained by U.S. Special Forces in Nerkh has decided to speak out on camera. His name is Qandi. He was held for nearly a year and then released without charge.

QANDI: [translated] They came to my house and arrested me in front of my guests. They brought me straight to the Afghan army base, and from there they took me to the American base. They took me alone to a cell inside the base, made of plywood, like they use for doors. The Americans were there. They were together. They said I was with the enemy and that they had information that I had weapons.

At 10:00 at night, they came with the cables. They started hitting me all over. They also bound my testicles, and they took my clothes except for my pants. They threw water on me. At this point in the night, they beat me very badly on my feet and my hands. They took my shirt and beat me with cables.

Yes, sir, I saw with my own eyes that they killed people.

AMY GOODMAN: That video was produced by Matt Aikins and Bethany Matta for *The Nation*. Matt Aikins first reported on the massacre in Afghanistan in a 2013 *Rolling Stone* [article](#) [e](#) headlined "The A-Team Killings." His latest [piece](#) for *The Nation* is headlined "US Special Forces May Have Gone on a Murder Spree in Afghanistan—Did the Army Cover It Up?"

Well, last week, Nermeen Shaikh and I sat down with Matt Aikins. I started by asking him to explain what he first revealed in that piece.

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Well, what we first exposed was the actual unit that was there. You know, there had been these allegations. There had been protests by locals saying that this mysterious U.S. Army unit, and its translators, was killing people and torturing them. But, you know, this being the Special Operations Forces, they're shrouded in a lot of mystery. And the U.S. military of course denied and claimed it had done these investigations exonerating themselves. So what we did was we actually went in and did enough interviews and eventually tracked down one of the translators for this unit who had been arrested and put in an Afghan prison. And

by doing that, we actually found out what unit it was. It was an A-Team of U.S. Army Special Forces, ODA 3124, that had been based there.

AMY GOODMAN: And describe what happened to Qandi and his connection.

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Well, Qandi was picked up by U.S. forces in November 2012. He was, you know, one of many men who were rounded up by this unit. Now, everything that he says after that is based on his own testimony, but is consistent with many other witnesses that we also spoke to. He says he was taken to this base, accused of being an insurgent, and tortured, you know, beaten with cables, sexual torture. He was subjected to mock drownings, threatened with death, of course, many times.

And what's interesting is that he was actually in Bagram prison, so he spent 45 days there, he says, and then was transferred to Bagram, which is the main U.S. detention facility in Afghanistan, or was at the time. And so, when we did this investigation, he wasn't available, he was in Bagram. But he actually said that he had, to the Red Cross and to his relatives who visited him in prison—he said he had witnessed murders. He had seen some of the disappeared men beaten to death by these Special Forces and their Afghan translators with his own eyes. So, after he was released a year later without charges from Bagram, we tracked him down and got his story, and what he told us was pretty horrific.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: So I want to go to another part of *The Nation's* interview with Qandi. Here he talks about a man named Sayed Mohammad. Qandi also explains what he saw of the treatment of Afghan prisoners.

QANDI: [translated] They brought Sayed Mohammad before sunset, and they killed him before it was dark. They didn't keep him there long. The others spent three nights or four nights with me. As soon as they brought him, they started beating him. They would straddle the prisoner and start beating him. From this side, the Afghan translators would strike with cables and their feet. And the Americans would beat on the head. They had blue or green eyes and long red

beards.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: That was an excerpt from the video produced by our guest, Matt Aikins, and Bethany Matta for *The Nation*. So, Matt, could you talk about what Qandi says? He was picked up by Special Forces—when he says "they," that's who he's referring to. U.S. Special Forces picked him up, and specifically this—was it the A-Team who picked him up? And then, also, you point out in the piece that what happened in Nerkh, the Nerkh killings, stand out in the course of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan despite the fact that the U.S. military was often accused of human rights abuses. So what was it about what happened in Nerkh that distinguishes it from past such incidents?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Yeah, well, Qandi identified the unit that picked him up as a Special Forces unit that was based at the time in Nerkh. And, of course, the U.S. military would know that, because he was subsequently transferred to Bagram, so they would have records of exactly who picked him up.

As for this incident itself and why it stands out, you know, in a war that's marked with so many war crimes committed by U.S. forces, Afghan forces and, of course, the Taliban, as well, I think there's three reasons. First, the gravity of what happened. We're talking about torture and murder of at least 17 people, disappearances, right? Often of people who were rounded up in broad daylight.

Second, we're not talking about some deranged soldier here, right? We're not talking about Sergeant Robert Bales, for example, who went crazy and killed 16 Afghan civilians in the course of a night. We're talking about an elite U.S. military unit that conducted this over a sustained period of time as part of their operations.

And finally, there's the question of why the U.S. military did three investigations without finding anything, exonerating itself, given that—you know, everything that's subsequently come to light through reports like my own, through the Red Cross's investigation, through the U.N.'s investigation, as well as now the fact that there's a criminal investigation. How could they have

done three investigations, not found anything, without someone covering it up?

AMY GOODMAN: Let's turn to another part of the interview that you did with Qandi, where he describes how he was transferred to Bagram Air Base.

QANDI: [translated] They changed my clothes in that base. It was 11:30 at night. They took me in a helicopter to the car. When they took me out of the car, I could feel the wind of the rotors. It was very cold, but I couldn't hear anything. Four people picked me up by my arms and legs and put me in the helicopter and took me to Bagram.

AMY GOODMAN: That was an excerpt, again, from the video produced by Matt Aikins, the award-winning reporter, and Bethany Matta for *The Nation*, as he describes what happened to him and when he was brought to Bagram. This very official—as you say, this is all on the record. The U.S. was running this base. And the investigations you're talking about of the A-Team, this isn't back during the George Bush era, this is well into President Obama's tenure as president of the United States, three investigations in a series of months. Why now, a few years later, have they reopened this investigation?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Well, that's actually a very good question. We don't know at the moment why it's been reopened specifically. But obviously, in the case review process, when this sort of goes up the chain of command, they thought that the original investigation had overlooked something, that it needed a second look. So, in that sense, it is kind of encouraging—at least the process isn't dead. You know, in many of these cases, as been documented, for example, in a recent Amnesty International report, there just is no follow-up whatsoever when there's clear evidence of violations of laws by U.S. forces. It's no surprise, because the U.S. military sort of investigates itself and is responsible for holding itself accountable. There's not an independent prosecutorial mechanism within the military justice system. It's controlled by the commanders of the men who are basically being charged.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: Well, I mean, Amnesty International, in that report, also raises some

concerns and has issued a statement recently, after they said that this case was going to be reopened, that it's still the military that is investigating the case. So the same concerns that existed before exist now. In other words, why wouldn't they simply exonerate the team again? Why can't the military be tried by a civilian court?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Because that's just not how the laws of the United States work. The military has its own jurisdiction over violations of the laws of war. And so, in this case, it's really up to the military. Now there is a sort of independent criminal investigation command that's handling this, and it's not like they're going to just cover this up, especially when it's gotten to this level. But, you know, two years into it, the evidence, for example, has really gone cold in a lot of cases, and you've got to wonder—you know, when I did this original report, which came out in the end of 2013, none of the witnesses that I had spoken to had ever been interviewed by the U.S. military investigators. And it wasn't until that winter that they finally began talking to people, almost a year after it happened.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: Matt, I want to ask you about the one person who has been prosecuted in connection with these killings. His name is Zikria, and you're one of the few journalists, or perhaps only ones, who has met him. Can you talk about this person?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Yeah, he was someone who came up fairly early on in these incidents. He was accused by locals of torturing them, of executing people, and then he sort of fled. A video emerged of him beating the man, Sayed Mohammad, whose body you showed earlier. His body was found outside the Special Forces base. So, he was a kind of a figure of mystery in the beginning. The U.S. military really disavowed him, said he wasn't an actual paid interpreter, and supposedly a Special Forces team said, "Oh, no, he escaped, and we don't know anything about him."

When he was arrested later on by the Afghan intelligence service and sent to prison, that's when I met with him. And he told me that he had been working multiple tours with the U.S. military as a paid interpreter and had carried a weapon with them, and he blamed the killings and the torture on actually these Special Forces guys. He said he didn't do it, even though there's many witnesses who say that he did. He named specific members of the Special Forces, he named specific soldiers, and said, "No, it was them. They are responsible." So he's the only person who's really been convicted to date in connection with these incidents, and he

has placed the blame on the Americans that he worked for.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: And he's received what? Twenty years in prison? What's his sentence?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: He's received 20 years in prison for treason, which is interesting, rather than murder or any of these alleged crimes. I think the Afghan government did not want to go much deeper into it. I think they wanted to kind of shove it under the corner. So—

AMY GOODMAN: And wouldn't the U.S. government want him put away, as well, since he has information?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Well, he's there. He's actually been transferred to Bagram, which is now under Afghan control. So, if they wanted to get information from him or meet with him, it would be very easy for them to do so.

AMY GOODMAN: So, by your estimation, how many people died as a result of the A-Team and the killings that they were engaged in?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: We know of at least 17 individuals by name from that area.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: And what do you think this says about the elite Special Forces like the A-Team and how they operated in Afghanistan? Do you think it's likely—for instance, Amnesty raised the question of whether there are many more incidents like this of abuses by the U.S. military that we may or may not know of.

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Well, what happened in this case is shockingly extreme. But, for example, when I talked to Zikria, and other translators who knew him, who had worked for the same unit, they said he had killed people before in previous deployments in Uruzgan province, with this same unit, killed prisoners. I think this case raises very serious questions about what kind of oversight and accountability there are for these elite units that are working out in remote and dangerous areas on their own, that have been through, you know, eight or nine or 10 deployments in some of the most brutal parts of Afghanistan, and whether or not this kind of torture and extended interrogations and just the practices that have been unearthed in this case are in fact more widespread than we'd like to know.

AMY GOODMAN: Where is the A-Team now?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: As far as I know, they've been back to the U.S., and they're in Fort Bragg, which is the home of the Special Forces.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: Are the names of the officers or soldiers who were named by Zikria, are those public?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: We decided to go public with a few of the names who are named specifically by Zikria and other individuals, people who held key positions of responsibility within the unit, which was a controversial decision. We were asked by the military not to publish their names. But, you know, they're civil servants, they're part of the U.S. government representing America overseas. And we felt, in this case, that it was essential for purposes of accountability to name the key members.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: So what do you think—in your view, what's the best outcome of this reopened investigation?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: The best outcome would be a transparent and accountable process. So, you know, whatever they decide, they need to be clear and public about why they decided it. And, of course, that won't happen. These proceedings, unless they actually reach a court-martial stage, are never made public. You can try to force it out of them through Freedom of Information requests, which we will certainly do, but—and that's another major flaw in the military justice system, is that it has a complete lack of transparency.

AMY GOODMAN: Do you think that some members of this A-Team should be brought up on charges of murder and tried?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: That's not really something for me to decide. You know, I think that it's clear in this case that there is very strong evidence that crimes were committed. There are dead bodies being recovered outside the base. What should happen is there should be a thorough investigation. And if there is evidence, then people should be charged.

AMY GOODMAN: We are, in October, moving into the 15th year of the war in Afghanistan. Are operations like you exposed with the A-Team continuing?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: They are not continuing in the same way, because you don't have the same military footprint, so I don't think there are isolated Special Forces units living on remote fire bases like you had at the time. But definitely, there's still extensive U.S. military involvement in the war. You just had two Special Forces members who were killed in Helmand province last week in a friendly fire incident, because they were trying to fight the Taliban, which, again, is not really what the authorization for President Obama's current troop deployments there. It's supposed to be a training mission and going after al-Qaeda. But it's clear that 15 years in, the U.S. is still fighting a war in Afghanistan.

