

Afghanistan to Investigate Video Showing Forces Mutilating Taliban Corpses

Many fear the video and other inflammatory clips circulating on social media will fuel revenge-taking long after any peace deal.



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Published Aug. 13, 2020 Updated Aug. 27, 2020

KABUL, Afghanistan — Afghanistan’s defense ministry said it was investigating a video circulating on social media Thursday that showed men in Afghan army uniform mutilating bodies of purported Taliban fighters.

The intensification of violence on the eve of peace talks to end the war, with fighters from both sides often resorting to brutal tactics, has raised concerns that revenge-taking might continue long after any peace deal is signed.

The two-minute cellphone footage shows the men in uniforms smashing the heads of corpses with hatchets. Other soldiers, with their faces visible, are gathered around the scene — some laugh, some film and photograph, one stands over a body, smoking a cigarette as he poses for a picture.

The Taliban, in a statement, said the bodies of their fighters were mutilated in the Arghandab district of Zabul Province. In early April, the Taliban killed a large number of soldiers from an Afghan army unit there, in the deadliest episode in the district in recent months. An Afghan official said the video likely dates to around that time.

One man filming the mutilation scene can be heard saying, “They had come to fight in Arghandab — this is their Red Unit,” referring to the Taliban’s elite force.

“If proven that these were personnel of the Afghan army, the perpetrators will be dealt with according to the law,” the defense ministry said.

The Taliban and the Afghan government are expected to begin direct negotiations in a few days, as part of an agreement reached in February between the insurgents and the United States, which backs the government. That agreement has already led to a drawdown of American forces, from a little over 12,000 troops to about 8,000. As preparations for the direct talks stalled, bogged down by a dispute over exchanging prisoners, violence has intensified across the country.

The Taliban in recent months have killed members of the Afghan forces who had long left the force, or have repeatedly targeted officers who were on their way home to their families and posing no immediate threat, then dumped their bodies after executing them.

In the buildup to the talks, both sides have gone online to spread images and videos of the other’s abuses. The widespread images sow hatred that could fan vengeance long after a peace agreement on paper.

“As the violence continues, we see more brutal and shocking tactics from the sides and examples of revenge-taking, and that is very worrying and impacts any trust in a peace process,” said Shaharзад Akbar, the chief of Afghanistan’s Independent Human Rights Commission.

“It is on the leadership of the two sides to have clear messages to their fighters to avoid war crimes and actions that furthers the instinct for revenge that will make the reconciliation that should come out of a peace process difficult.”

Taimoor Shah contributed reporting from Kandahar, Afghanistan, and Fahim Abed from Kabul.