Body of Reuters photographer Danish Siddiqui was mutilated in Taliban custody, officials say

KABUL: The body of Danish Siddiqui, a Pulitzer Prize-winning Reuters photojournalist who was killed in Afghanistan this month, was badly mutilated while in the custody of the Taliban, officials said this past week.

The revelation comes amid concern that the fighting in Afghanistan, where the Taliban have carried out an aggressive military offensive since the United States withdrew nearly all its troops, has become increasingly brutal as peace talks have stalled.

Siddiqui, 38, an Indian national who took some of the most memorable news photographs from South Asia in recent years, was killed on the morning of July 16, when Afghan commandos he had accompanied to Spin Boldak, a border district recently captured by the Taliban, were ambushed. Initial photographs from the scene showed Siddiqui's body with multiple wounds but fully intact.

But by that evening, when the body was handed over to the Red Cross and transferred to a hospital in the southern city of Kandahar, it had been badly mutilated, according to two Indian officials and two Afghan health officials there. The mutilation was reported by an Indian website, Newslaundry, in the days after Siddiqui's killing.

The New York Times reviewed multiple photographs, some provided by Indian officials and others taken by Afghan health workers at the hospital, that showed Siddiqui's body had been mutilated. One Indian official said that the body had nearly a dozen bullet wounds and that there were tire marks on Siddiqui's face and chest.

One of the health officials in Kandahar said that the body, along with Siddiqui's press vest, had reached the city's main hospital around 8 p.m. on the day he was killed. His face was unrecognizable, said the official, who added that he could not determine exactly what had been done to the body.

A Taliban spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, denied any wrongdoing on the part of the insurgents, saying that they were under orders to treat bodies with respect and to hand them over to local elders or the Red Cross. But the Taliban were in control of the area at the time, and some photographs showed what appeared to be the group's fighters standing around Siddiqui's body, which was then intact.

"Danish always chose to be on the front lines so that abuses and atrocities could not remain hidden," said Meenakshi Ganguly, the South Asia director for Human Rights Watch. "The brutality with which Taliban fighters punished Danish proves the abuses that he was documenting."

Human Rights Watch and other watchdog groups say the Taliban have carried out a series of revenge killings in Kandahar province, where some of the most brutal episodes in Afghanistan's last four war-torn decades have occurred.

The Taliban rose to power from the southern province in the 1990s, promising to end atrocities carried out by local militias. In recent years, Afghan forces led by Abdul Raziq, a general who was assassinated in 2018, were accused of ruthless tactics as they fought the Taliban in Kandahar. Spin Boldak, where Siddiqui died, was Raziq's hometown. Reports have emerged of the Taliban detaining, and in some cases executing, people who had been associated with the general.

There are conflicting reports about what happened on July 16, as the Afghan special forces with whom Siddiqui was traveling tried to retake Spin Boldak.

Accounts from local officials, as well as Taliban members, suggest that Siddiqui and the Afghan unit's commander were killed in a crossfire when their convoy was ambushed from multiple directions. Their bodies were left on the battlefield as the rest of the unit retreated, according to this version of events.

Some news outlets reported that Siddiqui might have been captured alive by the Taliban and then executed. Those reports could not be confirmed. One Indian official, however, said that some of Siddiqui's wounds appeared to be from gunshots at close range.

Three days before his killing, Siddiqui posted a video on Twitter in which he said several rocket-propelled grenades had struck the armored vehicle in which he was traveling.

His body, in a closed coffin, was returned to his home in New Delhi two days after his death. The narrow alley leading to his house was crowded with neighbors and friends. Colleagues – many of whom had accompanied him as he covered some of India's most tumultuous recent events, such as mass protests and the COVID-19 pandemic – wept, hugged and consoled one another.

Siddiqui was buried late at night in a cemetery at Jamia Millia Islamia, the university in New Delhi from which he had graduated. At a candlelight vigil, reporters held pictures of him wearing his press vest.

The text read simply, "Danish Siddiqui, Killed in Afghanistan."

Monitoring Desk

Attack on UNAMA office shows lack of Taliban commitment to international laws

By: Suraya Raiszada

Following increased violence and surge in Taliban attacks, the group's attack on the United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan (UNAMA) office in western Herat has proved that the group has no commitment to international laws.

Taliban by carrying out such attacks has entered with its new phase of violence in the country, which can have dangerous consequences for the group. In the meantime, such crimes and attacks of the group will put presence of the international organizations and their operations at full risk.

On the other hand, such violation of human rights as irresponsibly killing of innocent civilians, war prisoners, kangaroo courts, whipping women, destruction of public infrastructures, explosion of public infrastructures and currently attack on the UNAMA office are considered as war crimes of the Taliban group.

International donor organizations particularly UN in Afghanistan are civil agencies focusing on peace efforts, enhancement of rights of the people of Afghanistan and delivering humanitarian assistance; therefore, attack on UN agencies can show that the group has no respect to any principle.

UN agencies have been present and operating in various fields in Afghanistan for the past 50 years. After the falling of the Taliban regime and formation of new interim government in 2001, the UN efforts increased with new mechanism to support the governance process.

In the past 20 years, in consideration to change of circumstances and possibility of presence of international organizations in the country the UN has focused its mission on supporting government institutions, rule of law, counter narcotics, human rights and humanitarian aids as the organization has had positive work in all the mentioned fields.

Besides, the UN agencies has played vital role in connection with coordination international efforts to support good governance, holding elections and capacity building of civil and military personnel of Afghanistan government in the past two decades.

It seems that role and work of the UN agencies in running peace process and solution of disputes is inevitable and can be positive and constructive.

We can say that international organizations particularly the United Nations are fulfilling their responsibilities as it has made continued efforts to resolve the current crisis in Afghanistan for the past 30 years. In current circumstance, the UN has repeatedly asked the Taliban group to reduce in violence and enter negotiation with Afghanistan government to end the ongoing war in the country.

Despites all efforts from all stakeholders and UN agencies in Afghanistan towards maintaining peace and stability in the country, the people of Afghanistan have not touched peace. Recent surge in Taliban attacks and increasing violence in the country have displaced thousands of Afghan families in various provinces of the country.

It is time that all allies of Afghanistan government and international organizations should exert continued pressures on the Taliban group and its supporters to reduce in violence and accept comprehensive ceasefire to end the ongoing war in the country.

Increasing unprecedentedly violence by the Taliban group, continued perpetration of war crimes and violation of humanitarian laws by the group have showed the group's lack of commitment to international conventions and laws. Afghanistan government has asked the world countries and organizations to take legal action against the Taliban for lacking commitment to international laws.

Suraya Raiszada

Education and Afghanistan's security

By: Karen J. Greenberg,

US President Joe Biden has decided that it is time for American troops finally to leave Afghanistan, the first country to which the United States sent troops after the September 11, 2001, terror attacks. He set a fitting withdrawal deadline — the 20th anniversary of those attacks — but America's remaining troops have left the country much sooner, with only 600 remaining in early July, along with other NATO forces and thousands of private contractors.

Biden's timetable has elicited cheers from those who are eager to end the "forever wars". But it has also drawn criticism from those who predict the collapse of the Afghan government, a takeover by the Taliban, and renewed Al Qaeda activity. Already, violence is on the rise, and progress in areas like women's rights, hygiene and health is at risk of being reversed. Yet, there are ways to mitigate such risks that have little to do with the military.

As it stands, the military dimension of America's Afghan policy seems to be the one getting all the attention. "Ending US involvement in an endless war doesn't end the endless war," warned Gen. David Petraeus, a former commander of the US Central Command and CIA director. "It just ends our involvement. And I fear that this war is going to get worse." Petraeus also noted that the US is losing a valuable platform for regional counterterrorism campaigns, concluding that America would come to regret the decision to withdraw.

Biden administration officials share some of these fears. CIA Director William Burns has highlighted the challenges posed by America's diminished capacity to collect intelligence in the country. Ultimately, as National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan bluntly put it, the Biden administration "can't make any guarantees about what will happen inside the country. No one can".

But, Sullivan continued, the Biden administration can improve Afghanistan's chances of defying the prophecies of doom by providing resources and training to the country's security forces. Moreover, as Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin assured NATO, the US will "continue to fund key Afghan capabilities". Drones, cruise missiles, and spyware, officials say, will be available for intelligence gathering and lethal attacks. The US will stay vigilant, Sullivan promises, albeit from afar.

But such hard-power tactics alone will not stabilise Afghanistan, let alone put it on the path toward long-term peace and prosperity. For that, soft-power solutions are also essential.

Even as US and NATO troops leave, the United Nations is maintaining its presence in Afghanistan to deliver aid. So, reportedly, are more than 160 humanitarian agencies. Last week, the US State Department pledged $266 million in new assistance to help its humanitarian partners in the country deliver support to those in need, including millions who are internally displaced.

Some experts have advanced promising proposals for leveraging such aid to improve Afghanistan's prospects. Robert Gates, another former CIA director who was also US secretary of defence, suggests establishing an international Afghan development fund whose funds would be conditioned on political and economic reforms or on a peace agreement that includes "basic rights for women and a disavowal of terrorists".

Likewise, Ashley Jackson and Rahmatullah Amiri argue that international aid can be leveraged to ensure that women and girls retain the rights they have gained over the last two decades, even if the "retrogressive" Taliban returns to power. After all, they point out, the current Afghan government relies on international aid for 75 per cent of its budget.

Jackson and Amiri emphasise the role of education — and for good reason. With over 70 per cent of the Afghan population under 25 years of age, educating today's young people means creating a generation of skilled workers, potentially effective leaders, and engaged citizens. That is a formula for political stability and sustained economic development.

Over the past 20 years, significant progress has been made on the education front. After 2001, access to education among boys and girls increased tenfold. The US Agency for International Development (USAID), citing the Afghan Ministry of Higher Education, reports that "student enrollment grew from 900,000 male students in 2001 to more than 9.5 million students, 39 per cent of whom are girls, in 2020".

Much of this progress has been enabled by foreign donors. With such support, NGOs, working with UNICEF, have contributed to strengthening elementary education. USAID has developed programmes that engage US universities and schools to bolster the development of Afghan educational institutions. Donor-supported graduate programs, teaching training, certification programs, and guidance on educational standards have helped professionalise teaching and energise research.

But delivering quality universal education in Afghanistan remains an uphill battle. According to UNICEF, an estimated 3.7 million Afghan children are out of school, more than half of them girls. The COVID-19 pandemic and the recent uptick in violence have created additional headwinds. As the withdrawal of US and NATO troops raises the risk of further violence, the maintenance — and expansion — of educational support is essential.

Given security and health considerations, remote partnerships will be central to this effort. Fortunately, such arrangements can build on the rapid development of virtual learning platforms and teaching methodologies, as well as expanded access to telecommunications hardware, that the pandemic spurred.

To be sure, while education is a necessary condition for stability and prosperity in Afghanistan, it is not sufficient to ensure that outcome. But, as USAID head Samantha Power observed in her memoir, education can turn impossible ambitions into achievable goals. Thanks to the efforts of the past 20 years, this has already happened for many girls and women in Afghanistan. Ensuring that it continues to happen is not up to international troops. But it is up to the international community.

Karen J. Greenberg, director of the Centre on National Security at Fordham University's School of Law, is the author of the forthcoming "Subtle Tools: The Dismantling of American Democracy from the War on Terror to Donald Trump". Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2021.