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Seventeen Afghan partygoers beheaded by Taliban

Reuters (27.08.2012) - Fifteen men and two women have been found beheaded in Afghanistan's southern Helmand province. Officials said the victims were killed by Taliban insurgents as punishment for attending a mixed-sex party with music and dancing.

The bodies were found in a house near the Musa Qala district, 46 miles north of the provincial capital Lashkar Gah, on Monday, said the district governor Nimatullah, who goes by only one name.

"The victims threw a late-night dance and music party when the Taliban attacked," on Sunday night, Nimatullah told Reuters.

There were no immediate claims of responsibility.

Men and women do not usually mingle in Afghanistan unless they are related, and parties involving both genders are rare and highly secretive affairs.

For the Taliban, flirting, open displays of affection and the mixing of men and women are vehemently condemned.

In June, Taliban gunmen stormed a luxury hotel near Kabul demanding to know where the "prostitutes and pimps" were, according to witnesses. Twenty people were killed.

The Taliban said it launched that attack on Qarga Lake because the hotel was used for "wild parties".

During their five-year reign, which was ended by US-backed Afghan forces in 2001, the Taliban banned women from voting, most work and leaving their homes unaccompanied by their husband or a male relative.

Those rights have been painstakingly regained but Afghanistan remains one of the worst places on earth to be a woman.

A spokesman for the Helmand governor, Daud Ahmadi, said a team had been sent to the site of the beheadings to investigate.

Burned Islamic religious material had 'extremist inscriptions'

CNN (21.02.12) - Religious materials including Qurans that were burned at Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan, sparking Afghan protests -- were removed from the library of a

detainee center "because of extremist inscriptions" on them, a military official said Tuesday.

There was "an appearance that these documents were being used to facilitate extremist communications," a military official said.

"Additionally, some of the documents were extremist in and of themselves, apparently originating from outside of Afghanistan," the official said.

The official said the material was burned, but authorities are attempting to determine how much.

The uproar prompted Gen. John Allen, commander of NATO's International Security Assistance Force, to issue a directive "that all coalition forces in Afghanistan will complete training in the proper handling of religious materials no later than March 3," the NATO-led force said..

The training will include "the identification of religious materials, their significance, correct handling and storage," according to the statement from coalition forces.

Earlier Tuesday, Allen said the materials were gathered for disposal from the airfield's Parwan detention facility and inadvertently given to troops for burning.

"This was not a decision that was made because they were religious materials," he said. "It was not a decision that was made with respect to the faith of Islam. It was a mistake. It was an error. The moment we found out about it, we immediately stopped and we intervened."

Hundreds of demonstrators gathered outside the airfield Tuesday, furious over reports of the burning.

Lt. Lauren Rago, a spokeswoman for the coalition forces, told CNN in an e-mail earlier Tuesday that an investigation was under way to determine whether any material was burned before the mistake was discovered and, if so, how much.

"We are deeply concerned about the report of Qurans or religious materials being damaged, and will get to the bottom of what actually happened," she said.

But a coalition official acknowledged the materials were improperly burned. Allen said he immediately launched an investigation.

"Something like this just cannot happen again," Allen said.

Muslims regard the Quran as the absolute word of God. It is so highly revered that many Muslims will not pick up the holy book without ablution, a ritual washing of the hands.

Desecrating the book, such as burning it, is therefore seen as an unforgivable affront -- as an act of intolerance and bigotry.

Authorities are looking into the reasons why the material was gathered and why the decision was made "to dispose of them in this manner," Allen said.

Some troops have been questioned, but there have been no arrests or detentions, according to a coalition official. Afghan officials have been invited to join the investigation.

Allen said he has offered "sincere apologies" to Afghan officials, including President Hamid Karzai. Allen also offered apologies to the Afghan government and "the noble people of Afghanistan."

"This was unintentional," he said. "There was no intention by any member of ISAF to defame the faith of Islam or to desecrate the precious religious materials of this faith."

"The materials recovered will be properly handled by appropriate religious authorities," Allen said earlier.

Local citizens who work at the base discovered the material that had been put into a burn pit by NATO personnel and alerted officials.

Soon after, demonstrators massed outside the base, chanting "Death to America! Death to the Afghan government! Long live Islam!"

As a NATO helicopter circled overhead and black smoke billowed from the ground, men shook their fists in anger. Several men launched slingshots in the direction of the base.

"The desecration of religious articles is not in keeping with the standards of American tolerance, human rights practices and freedom of religion," State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said Tuesday.

"The concern is that some around the world will think that this represents an affirmative statement by the United States, and it does not represent our values or our view of how the Quran ought to be treated," she said.

Allen said, "This is not who we are. These are very, very isolated incidents. We've been here a long time. We've been shoulder to shoulder with the Afghans for a long time. We've been dying alongside the Afghans for a long time because we believe in them. We believe in their country. We want to have every opportunity to give them a bright future."

But "these kinds of incidents, when they do occur, we will move quickly to correct them," he said. "We will move quickly to hold people accountable."

Photographs surfaced purporting to show the damaged Qurans. A photographer for Agence France-Presse said Afghans who work inside the airfield told him they obtained the Qurans there.

But the U.S. military said that was unlikely.

"When it became known that it was religious materials that were brought to the incinerator, the materials were secured by the military authorities in consultation with the local Afghan religious authorities, so it would be highly unlikely that the demonstrators would have any of the material from this incident," said Col. Gary Kolb, a spokesman for the NATO-led force.

The U.S. Embassy in Kabul warned on its Twitter feed that protests were possible throughout Afghanistan in the coming days and noted, "Past demonstrations in Afghanistan have escalated into violent attacks on Western targets of opportunity."

Last year, when controversial Florida pastor Terry Jones presided over what he called a trial of the Quran and burned a copy, Afghans took to the streets by the thousands. In the northern Afghan city of Mazar-e Sharif, demonstrators stormed a U.N. office and killed 12 people. In Kandahar, three people were killed in one demonstration, and nine in another when police and stone-throwing demonstrators clashed.

American officials vociferously condemned the pastor's act.

"It was intolerant and it was extremely disrespectful and again, we condemn it in the strongest manner possible," said Gen. David Petraeus, who headed the U.S.-led international forces in Afghanistan at the time.

In 2010, Afghans protested outside the Forward Operating Base Mirwais in response to an alleged Quran burning inside the base. But coalition forces said the suspected burning was a routine burn-pit session in which military documents are destroyed.

Quran burning: angry Afghans protest disposal of Islamic books at U.S. air base in Kabul

By Deb Riechmann

Huffington Post (21.02.12) - The U.S. apologized Tuesday for the burning of Muslim holy books that had been pulled from the shelves of a detention center library adjoining a major base in eastern Afghanistan because they contained extremist messages or inscriptions.

The White House echoed military officials in saying that the burning of Qurans and other Islamic reading material that had been tossed in a pile of garbage was an accident.

But more than 2,000 Afghans protested the incident outside the Bagram Air Base that stoked rising anti-foreign sentiment and fueled Afghan claims that foreign troops disrespect their culture and Islamic religion even as the Americans and other NATO forces prepare to withdraw by the end of 2014.

Demonstrators who gathered outside Bagram Air Field, one of the largest U.S. bases in Afghanistan, shouted, "Die, die, foreigners!" Some fired rifles into the air. Others threw rocks at the gate of the base and set tires on fire.

U.S. Gen. John Allen, the top commander of American and NATO forces in Afghanistan, said the books had been mistakenly given to troops to be burned at a garbage pit at Bagram, a sprawling U.S. military base north of the Afghan capital, Kabul.

"It was not a decision that was made because they were religious materials," Allen said. "It was not a decision that was made with respect to the faith of Islam. It was a mistake. It was an error. The moment we found out about it we immediately stopped and we intervened."

The Quran is the most sacred object in the daily lives of Muslims and burning it is considered an offense against God. The Quran is so important in the faith that Islamic teaching spells out how it should be handled, including directing anyone who touches it to be in a state of ritual purity. Muslims can only dispose of Qurans in very specific ways, including burning or burying those that have been damaged or corrupted to prevent God's word from being defiled.

A Western military official with knowledge of the incident said it appeared that the Qurans and other Islamic readings in the library were being used to fuel extremism, and that detainees at Parwan Detention Facility, which adjoins Bagram, were writing on the documents to exchange extremist messages. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to release the information.

The military official said that several hundred Islamic publications, including Qurans, were removed from the library. Some of the publications had extremist content; others had extremist messages written on their pages by detainees, the official said. The official said the documents were charred and burnt, but none of them were destroyed.

"We will look into the reason those materials were gathered," Allen said. "We will look into the manner in which the decision was made to dispose of them in this manner."

Allen issued a new directive ordering all coalition forces in Afghanistan to complete training in the proper handling of religious materials no later than March 3. The training will include the identification of religious materials, their significance, correct handling and storage, he said.

The White House also apologized, with press secretary Jay Carney saying it was a "deeply unfortunate incident" that doesn't reflect the respect the U.S. military has for the religious practices of the Afghan people. Carney did not address details about what occurred.

U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta added his voice, saying he disapproved of the conduct. He promised to review the results of the coalition's investigation to ensure that all steps are taken to prevent it from happening again.

In a statement, Afghan President Hamid Karzai condemned the incident and appointed a delegation to investigate. He said initial reports were that four Qurans were burned.

Early Tuesday, as word of the incident spread, about 100 demonstrators gathered outside the base in Parwan province. As the crowd grew, so did the outrage.

One protester, Mohammad Hakim, said if U.S. forces can't bring peace to Afghanistan, they should go home.

"They should leave Afghanistan rather than disrespecting our religion, our faith," Hakim said. "They have to leave and if next time they disrespect our religion, we will defend our holy Quran, religion and faith until the last drop of blood has left in our body."

Ahmad Zaki Zahed, chief of the provincial council, said U.S. military officials took him to a burn pit on the base where 60 to 70 books, including Qurans, were recovered. The books were used by detainees once incarcerated at the base, he said.

"Some were all burned. Some were half-burned," Zahed said, adding that he did not know exactly how many Qurans had been burned.

Zahed said five Afghans working at the pit told him that the religious books were in the garbage that two soldiers with the U.S.-led coalition transported to the pit in a truck Monday night. When they realized the books were in the trash, the laborers quickly worked to recover them, he said.

"The laborers there showed me how their fingers were burned when they took the books out of the fire," he said.

Afghan Army Gen. Abdul Jalil Rahimi, the commander of a military coordination office in the province, said he and other officials met with protesters, tribal elders and clerics to try to calm their emotional response. "The protesters were very angry and didn't want to end their protest," he said.

Later, however, the protesters ended the rally and said they would send 20 representatives from the group to Kabul to talk with Afghan parliamentarians and demanded a meeting with Karzai, Rahimi said.

The governor's office in Kandahar province in southern Afghanistan called the incident a "shameful move by some stupid individuals."

Zia Ul Rahman, deputy provincial police chief, said between 2,000 and 2,500 protesters demonstrated at the base.

"The people are very angry. The mood is very negative," Rahman said while the rally was going on. "Some are firing hunting guns in the air, but there have been no casualties." Police said a similar protest on Tuesday just east of Kabul ended peacefully.

In April 2011, Afghans protesting the burning of a Quran by a Florida pastor turned deadly when gunmen in the crowd stormed a U.N. compound in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif and killed three staffers and four Nepalese guards.

Also on Tuesday, NATO said four NATO service members were killed in southern Afghanistan – three in a roadside bombing and one in a non-battle related injury. The international military coalition did not give any other details about their deaths. So far this year, 47 NATO service members have been killed in Afghanistan.
