

U.S. pays \$40,000 after 15 Afghans die in raid

Commanders apologize for any civilians 'accidentally killed' in operation

U.S. Col. Greg Julian listens to village elders in Inzeri village in Kapisa province in the Tagab Valley, Afghanistan, on Tuesday. U.S. commanders distributed \$40,000 to relatives of people killed in a recent U.S. raid.

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TAGAB VALLEY, Afghanistan - U.S. commanders on Tuesday traveled to a poor Afghan village and distributed \$40,000 to relatives of 15 people killed in a U.S. raid, including a known militant commander. The Americans also apologized for any civilians killed in the operation.

The issue of civilian deaths is increasingly sensitive in Afghanistan, with President Hamid Karzai accusing the U.S. of killing civilians in three separate cases over the last month. Karzai has repeatedly warned the U.S. and NATO, saying such deaths undermine his government and the international mission.

In Washington, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates echoed Karzai's concerns, telling a Senate committee that "civilian casualties are doing us enormous harm in Afghanistan."

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As U.S. commanders paid villagers near 15 newly dug graves, Karzai met Tuesday in the capital with relatives of some of those killed. He told the villagers he has given the U.S. and NATO one month to respond to a draft agreement calling for increased Afghan participation in military operations.

Karzai said if he does not receive a response within that time, he would ask Afghans what he should do about international military operations. The statement from the presidential palace describing the meeting did not elaborate.

The U.S. is doubling its troop presence in Afghanistan this year to take on the Taliban militia; the Taliban and other militants now control wide swaths of territory. Last year, 151 U.S. troops died in Afghanistan, the most in any year since the U.S. invaded the Taliban-ruled country in late 2001 for sheltering Osama bin Laden.

Conflicting accounts

Col. Greg Julian, the top U.S. spokesman in Afghanistan, led Tuesday's delegation into the village of Inzeri, a small collection of stone and mud homes set high in a steep, rocky valley. Insurgents have a strong presence in the region just 30 miles north of Kabul.

A raid the night of Jan. 19 killed 15 people in Inzeri, including a targeted militant commander named Mullah Patang.

Afghan officials admit that Patang was killed, but villagers say civilians also died and have pressed their complaints with U.S. officials and Karzai.

The U.S. regularly makes payments to Afghan relatives of those killed in operations, but the payments are rarely publicized.

The villagers met the U.S. delegation about 100 yards from 15 newly dug graves. American officials asked for a list of the dead, but villagers said no one there was literate.

Julian told villagers that U.S. forces did not come Jan. 19 intending to fight, but opened fire after villagers fired on them. Many Afghan families are armed.

"Perhaps there may have been some people accidentally killed," Julian said as he looked at a mud-brick home where villagers said some Afghans died. "If there was collateral damage, I'm very sorry about that."

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The village elder, a man named Asadullah who goes by one name, showed Julian a picture of men in Afghan army uniforms. Asadullah said they were the sons of the militant Patang.

On the back of an Afghan army truck, U.S. officials paid \$40,000 in Afghan currency to representatives of the 15 people killed — \$2,500 for each death plus \$500 for two wounded men and \$1,500 for village repairs.