

By Associated Press

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Afghan security personnel escort arrested alleged Taliban and Islamic State group militants during an operation in Jalalabad on Oct. 1. Noorullah Shirzada / AFP - Getty Images file

ISLAMABAD — Heavily armed men burst into the home in the middle of night, hustling four brothers into separate rooms, their hands bound. [Afghan special forces](#) then shot them in the head and heart. The operation, the CIA-trained Afghan unit said, targeted the Islamic State

group's militants in a remote region of eastern Nangarhar Province.

In reality, the raid took place in the province's capital of Jalalabad, within earshot of Justice Ministry offices. In an interview with The Associated Press, the family said the dead brothers included a school teacher and an assistant to a member of Afghanistan's parliament. The truth of their deaths was eventually revealed by local and international media and the country's intelligence chief, Masoom Stanikzai, was forced to resign.

But that's not enough, says Human Rights Watch in a new report released Thursday documenting what it says are mounting atrocities by U.S.-backed Afghan special forces and [ripping civilian deaths](#) by both American and Afghan forces. It calls for an investigation into whether the U.S. has committed war crimes in Afghanistan.

[The report](#) says U.S.-led peace talks to end the 18-year-old war have omitted addressing the future of the Afghan special forces that work "as part of the covert operations of the Central Intelligence Agency." The report suggests either disbanding them or bringing them under the control of the Defense Ministry.

"These troops include Afghan strike forces who have been responsible for extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances, indiscriminate airstrikes, attacks on medical facilities, and other violations of international humanitarian law, or the laws of war," it says.

Speaking with The Associated Press on condition of anonymity, several Afghan, Taliban and U.S. officials, including some who are involved in trying to resuscitate peace talks, said the Taliban won't agree to reduce attacks without a reduction in violence from the U.S. and Afghan side.

[President Donald Trump ended negotiations with the Taliban](#) over what he said was the insurgents' unacceptable level of violence.

According to HRW and several U.N. reports, Afghan special operations units are now partly

responsible for rising civilian deaths and rights abuses. They operate with seeming impunity under Afghanistan's intelligence agency, the National Security Directorate, and hold nondescript names like Unit 01 or Khost Protection Forces.

HRW's report, the culmination of a nearly two-year investigation, documented instances of families terrorized by night raids, summary executions and disappearances of people, some of whom are never heard from again. In preparing the report, researchers interviewed 39 Afghans directly impacted by offenses and several witnesses in nine different provinces.

The report tells of raids in Zurmat in eastern Paktia Province. Witnesses said Afghan and U.S. strike forces blew open the door of one home and shot dead four men as the family watched. In a second house, three shopkeepers and a guest, all home for a holiday, were shot and killed, said a witness. In a third incident in Zurmat, a religious teacher and two construction workers were killed.



Former intelligence chief Masoom Stanikzai was forced to resign following a raid that killed a school teacher and an assistant to a member of parliament. Massoud Hossaini / AP file

Human Rights Watch shared its findings with both the U.S. and Afghan authorities.

Kaber Aqmal, spokesman for the National Security adviser, refused to respond to the report directly but said "the Afghan government is doing its best to safeguard lives of the Afghan

civilians, we are looking for all those possible ways to avoid civilian casualties." He blamed the casualties on Taliban insurgents.

The U.S. military, without addressing specific cases, blamed the suffering of civilians on Taliban, ISIS and al Qaeda fighters and called the Taliban violence "pointless." The U.S. says it holds itself to a higher standard of accountability than ISIS or the Taliban.

"The battlefield is complex_the fighting is in crowded cities and in populated villages," the U.S. military said in a response included in HRW's report. "Our challenges are immense because we face enemies who do not wear uniforms, who hide among women and children, and who use lies about the death of civilians to try and check our effectiveness."