

By Patricia Gossman

From [Just Security](#) | Original Article

Ibrahim, a farmer in Afghanistan's eastern province of Nangarhar, has the stooped walk of a man bearing an impossible burden. I met him two years ago while investigating civilian casualties from U.S. and Afghan airstrikes. But Ibrahim's story was not about bombs or drones. He had just lost three brothers and a nephew to a "night raid" – a commando operation led by Afghan paramilitaries and backed by the CIA, known as an "02" unit. The men stormed Ibrahim's home after midnight, fatally shot all four men, and took Ibrahim's 20-something son with them. When I met him, Ibrahim was still looking for his son—and answers.

Human Rights Watch was able to confirm Ibrahim's account (I have withheld his full name and village for his protection), and over the next two years documented many more cases of atrocities carried out by CIA-backed Afghan paramilitaries. The U.S. military cut back on night-time kill-or-capture operations after 2012 when it became clear that they were [alienating civilians](#)

and turning Afghans against their government. But night raids have surged once again as a key instrument of the Trump administration's strategy to pressure the Taliban for concessions that would pave the way for a U.S. troop withdrawal – what the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Austin Scott Miller

[has called](#) intensifying military operations "to shape the political environment."

In these night raids, the forces involved are Afghan strike force units [trained and equipped](#) by the CIA, and often accompanied by CIA operatives or U.S. Special Forces. They operate outside normal U.S. and Afghan military command structures, and target suspected Taliban or Islamic State fighters mainly in rural areas where the insurgents maintain a presence or control. In incidents across the country, these strike forces have unlawfully killed civilians, forcibly disappeared detainees, and attacked healthcare facilities for allegedly treating insurgent fighters. An Afghan friend who survived one such night raid told me that these raids are now "the way in all villages. We know they've shot many like this."

Rural areas of Afghan provinces like Nangarhar and Wardak are at the epicenter of what is

today the world's [deadliest conflict](#) . More civilians are dying in the Afghanistan war now [than at any time](#) since the United Nations started counting, and this year Afghanistan leads every other conflict in civilian deaths.

Airstrikes are playing a big part in that. The CIA-backed paramilitary forces are [authorized to call in airstrikes](#) at a time when the U.S. has already [loosened restrictions](#) that were in place to minimize risks to civilians. An [airstrike](#) in March in Nangarhar called in by an “02” unit killed 13 civilians, including 9 children, and no fighters. About the airstrike, the [U.S. military](#) only said they had launched “precision airstrikes” in a “complex environment.”

Since 2001, the CIA has maintained [a counterterrorism operation](#) in Afghanistan parallel to, but distinct from, the U.S. military operation, recruiting, training, and deploying Afghan paramilitary forces in pursuit of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and, since 2014, militants affiliated with the Islamic State. But poor intelligence and an assumption of guilt by association has led them to target civilians simply because they live in areas where the Taliban has gained influence, or because they have been falsely accused by local political rivals. “Why would they shoot everyone, all of them just poor guys?” Ibrahim said. “Afghans who provided false information to the American forces should be investigated.”

In other cases, providing food to insurgents is enough to warrant a death sentence. An elder man named Delawar from a village in Wardak province told me that “01,” another CIA-backed unit, had accused him of feeding the Taliban, then shot dead one of his sons and took the other one with them. He had not seen the second son since.

“The Taliban come every night demanding food—some are from these villages,” he said. “We have to feed them. We are caught in between.”

Many of those targeted in these raids are from poor, rural areas. They are off the radar of Afghanistan's urban media outlets, some of which are also wary of criticizing ongoing military operations against the Taliban. However, during a September raid in Jalalabad, Nangarhar's

capital, an “02” unit [killed four brothers](#) in their home as they slept. Protests on social media compelled the government to promise an investigation. Two months later, there are still no answers.

Even medical facilities are not immune from these attacks. Frustrated that local clinics treat wounded Taliban fighters, CIA-backed strike forces have [stormed clinics](#), assaulting and, in some cases, killing medical staff, and damaging equipment. Attacks on medical facilities challenge the very foundations of the laws of war, which are meant to protect medical workers, patients, and medical facilities from attack.

Some U.S. officials [have called](#) for preserving the CIA’s parallel operations and these strike forces even after a U.S. troop withdrawal, despite overwhelming evidence of their involvement in gross human rights abuses. But the appalling civilian cost of these operations should be ringing alarm bells for those working to see a genuine settlement to the Afghan conflict. For Afghans who have lost loved ones to these raids, and the lack of redress, it adds to a deep sense of grievance that will undermine efforts toward creating a durable peace.