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Shortly after the U.S. military was forced to vacate a base in Afghanistan's Wardak province this spring, the bodies of 10 Afghan villagers were found nearby. All of the people had disappeared after being detained by U.S. Special Forces. The base was used by a unit known as "The A-Team," which has also been linked to eight other murders in Wardak. The mystery behind the deaths is the center of a shocking new exposé which reports the disappearances and killings could amount to some of the gravest war crimes perpetrated by U.S. forces since the U.S.-led invasion in 2001. We are joined by Matthieu Aikins, an award-winning investigative journalist based in Kabul who spent five months investigating the killings for his Rolling Stone article, "The A-Team Killings."

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: A year ago yesterday, on November 6, 2012, tens of millions of Americans went to the polls to re-elect President Obama. On that same day, thousands of miles away, a 39-year-old Afghan farmer named Mohammad Qasim disappeared after being arrested by U.S. Special Forces. He was never heard from again.

Months later, an Afghan shepherd saw a feral dog digging at human remains now believed to be the farmer's. His decaying body was found just outside a base used by a team of U.S. Special Forces known as "the A-Team." The body was found just weeks after U.S. Special Forces were compelled by the Afghan government to leave the base amid allegations of torture and murder.

More and more bodies were soon found just outside the base located in Wardak province, west of Kabul. In total, Afghan officials say they have uncovered the bodies of 10 Afghan men, all of whom disappeared after being arrested by U.S. Special Forces. Eight other Afghans were killed by the Special Forces during operations.

AMY GOODMAN: The mystery behind the killings is the center of a shocking new [article](#) published by *Rolling Stone* magazine, which reports the disappearances and killings could amount to some of the gravest war crimes perpetrated by U.S. forces since the U.S.-led invasion in 2001.

On Wednesday, Human Rights Watch said any U.S. personnel who participated in or were otherwise responsible for the abuses should be criminally prosecuted. So far only one person has been arrested: an Afghan translator who went by the name Zikria Kandahari, who had been working for the American team. He was arrested in July by the Afghan government. *Rolling Stone* reports the U.S. military opened a criminal investigation into the killings in July; however, none of the witnesses and family members who were interviewed by *Rolling Stone* in Afghanistan during five months of reporting say they've ever been contacted by U.S. military investigators.

To talk more about this story, we're joined by Matthieu Aikins, an award-winning investigative journalist based in Kabul, Afghanistan. His article is titled "The A-Team Killings." It was just published by *Rolling Stone* magazine.

Welcome to *Democracy Now!*

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Thanks.

AMY GOODMAN: Why don't you start off by just laying out your findings?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Well, essentially, what we did was we interviewed dozens of witnesses, family members of the victims, officials who had investigated—there was investigations done, confidential ones, by both the U.N. and the Red Cross, as well as the Afghan government—and laid out what had happened in this isolated valley, because, you know, even though these allegations emerged last winter and continued into the spring and were quite controversial, led

to local demonstrations, no one really knew who this mysterious unit was, if they were CIA

, if they were some sort of Special Forces team. The military had, right up until they opened this criminal investigation, categorically denied any responsibility.

So, what we did is we laid out a timeline of what happened, and we discovered who this unit was. We established conclusively that these men who disappeared were picked up by American forces, often in these mass roundups in villages in broad daylight. So it's not a question of whether they were picked up by them; it's a question of what happened to them afterwards. And then, in the end, we were able to actually identify the unit and even get in to see this translator, Zikria Kandahari.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: Now, long before the American military launched its investigation, this had become a major issue in Afghanistan, with President Karzai actually demanding that the U.S. troops on that base be removed. Could you talk about that? And when did that happen?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: The—as you mentioned, these incidents started in November, but they really reached a sort of fever point in February, when a body of a student named Nasratullah was found, you know, with his throat slit under a bridge.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: This was in February of this year.

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Of this year, that's right. So, the family claimed that he had been picked up by the Special Forces. It's not clear exactly what happened, but it had been bubbling in local politics and press for a while. So mass demonstrations erupted in Wardak. And Karzai, who had previously ordered an investigation into the allegations, just demanded that the team leave, the Special Forces leave Wardak province, where they were based, this valley called Nerkh. So, that's really when it reached a crisis point. There was talks between Karzai and the American-led ISAF, and—

AMY GOODMAN: ISAF being?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: The International Security Assistance Force, which is the U.S. and NATO military mission in Afghanistan. So, what had ended up happening is this became a kind of political point, because right now, as you know, the U.S. and Afghanistan are locked in these negotiations over the future of American forces in Afghanistan. And one of the main sticking points is the legal status of U.S. forces post-2014. The U.S. is adamant that they should have legal immunity from Afghan law for its forces, and of course the Afghans are reluctant to grant that. Now, as you know as well, in Iraq, this is what led to the so-called "zero option," the sudden withdrawal of U.S. forces, something that no one really predicted, just a couple years before. And there is some speculation that if they can't reach a negotiation over the—that will provide legal immunity of U.S. forces, they could have to pull out.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: But now the troops pulled out in April from that base, but it wasn't until July that the United States actually began a formal investigation of the charges?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Yeah, absolutely. And there's something that's really troubling raised by this timeline, because if you—if you look, the allegations are first reported—and the U.S. military has acknowledged this—they were first reported to a U.S. Army officer by the victims in November, right? Right at the beginning of all these killings. And yet, even as the allegations mounted, even as investigations were done by the U.N., the Red Cross and the Afghan government, that all found the witnesses' testimony credible of—that there were war crimes being committed by this U.S. unit, even as the bodies came out of the ground in April, May, the U.S. military stuck to its denial, saying there had been three investigations that had cleared them of all wrongdoing.

AMY GOODMAN: A spokesperson from the ISAF, the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, told *Democracy Now!* no one was available to join us for the show to respond to your new report, but he provided this statement: quote, "We are aware of the recently published *Rolling Stone* article which repeats prior allegations concerning ISAF personnel. Allegations arising out of incidents in Wardak in 2012-13 have been turned over to the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command. According to officials at CID, they will not release information on this matter at the present time to protect the integrity of this ongoing investigation. ISAF takes all allegations of detainee abuse seriously and we will continue to cooperate with the Afghan government in regard to any issues involving the conduct of coalition forces." Matt Aikins, your response?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Well, they did turn it over to the Army Criminal Investigative Command in July, and they say that that was because they received new information from the Red Cross, which—this is according to the American military—had given them new evidence that led them to open—to request that investigation be opened. Now, the Red Cross investigation happened much earlier on. It was essentially completed by the time the bodies came out of the ground, from what I understand from speaking to officials who were familiar with that report. The Red Cross doesn't speak directly to its own confidential investigations.

But the question really is: Who else knew about these incidents beforehand? How is it possible that at least one level in the chain of command above this unit could not have known that there were war crimes? There was serious evidence of war crimes in Wardak province. And if they weren't involved in a cover-up, then they must have at least been willfully blind.

AMY GOODMAN: And the A-Team is from?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: The A-Team is from Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

AMY GOODMAN: We're going to—we're going to continue the discussion after break. Matthieu Aikins is with us. He is the author of "The A-Team Killings." It's just come out in *Rolling Stone* magazine. Stay with us.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: This is *Democracy Now!*, democracynow.org, *The War and Peace Report*. I'm Amy Goodman, with Juan González. Our guest is Matthieu Aikins. He's an award-winning investigative journalist based in Kabul, Afghanistan, has just published the piece in *Rolling Stone* magazine, "The A-Team Killings." Juan?

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: Well, Matt, you were talking how the military has now begun its own investigation, but you have discovered, so far, that they haven't interviewed any of the witnesses that you—that you talked to. So this appears to be almost like a phantom investigation. Have you been contacted, for instance, by the military, maybe asking you, "Well, can you could give us the names of some of the folks that you talked to, how we might be able to reach them?"

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Well, I hope they will, because they haven't. And it really was baffling to me how I could spend five months digging into this story, and I've interviewed all the key witnesses and gathered all the key evidence myself, and not have somehow run into this investigation which was taking place. So it really raises the question of whether this investigation is being taken seriously, whether it's being properly resourced. And, of course, you have to see it in the context of the very poor track record the U.S. military has in reviewing, you know, allegations of abuse in custody and other incidents like that in the past and bringing the culprits to justice.

AMY GOODMAN: So let's talk about some of the people who were killed, whose bodies were found. One of the Afghans who died after being detained by U.S. Special Forces was a university student named Nasratullah. In February, his mother recalled how she was woken up at night by men she called Americans, who burst into her family's home. Two days later, she said, villagers found Nasratullah's corpse, half eaten by village dogs under a nearby bridge. This is Bibi Shereen.

BIBI SHEREEN: [translated] My son was taken, and his body was dropped under a bridge in the river. One of his fingers was cut off. He was beaten very badly. His body was swollen from torture, and his throat was slit. Why is the government not listening to our voices? Why are they not stopping the Americans from doing such things? While I wanted to stand up to talk with the Americans, they have pulled me back and hit me in my chest with the butt of a gun. I still feel pain here since I have been beaten. I cannot breathe. You can still see the marks of the beating on my chest.

AMY GOODMAN: Matthieu Aikins, can you talk about this case?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Sure. Well, I mean, it's really pitiful, when you consider the condition that these people are living in. They are living in absolute insecurity, pressed from both sides by the

insurgents and the U.S. military. And the case of Nasratullah is one of the ones that's less clear. We don't have the same kind of unambiguous evidence that we do, just because it happened at night, because there weren't multiple witnesses. But in other cases, you know, especially these daylight raids where they did round up whole villages, we do know that the U.S. military took these people away. Now, there's been—

AMY GOODMAN: Describe one of the scenes, like you begin your piece with, the two men who are sitting in their home.

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Sure. This is one of the most disturbing incidents that I came across. I don't mention his name in the piece; I give him a pseudonym, Omar. But Omar and his neighbor, Gul Rahim, who was a 28-year-old shopkeeper, were digging a stump in front of their house when an IED hit the U.S. Special Forces team as they were traveling nearby their village of Polad Khan. This was on November 10th of last year. And they soon saw Americans sort of coming down the road toward them, so they went inside. And two translators and an American, a bearded American, burst into their house—this is what Omar recounted to me—started beating them, dragged them out to the orchard, where they had found a command wire for the IED. It was the next-door orchard; it didn't belong to either of the men.

And as Omar watched, as one of the Americans held him and beat him, the other translator, this man Zikria Kandahari, took Gul Rahim about 10 paces away and raised his pistol to the back of his head and fired three shots, killing him, in front of the Americans. Omar then says that he was beaten and taken away to the U.S. Special Forces base. He was held for several days, suspended, whipped with cables, and interrogated by the Americans and the translators. Now, he was the only civilian witness that I spoke to, to Gul Rahim's execution, but three different neighbors that I spoke to from the same village told me that they saw the American Special Forces team arrive, they heard gunshots from the orchard, and when they came afterwards they found his bullet-riddled body lying there among the apple trees, the skull shattered.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: Now, what about the translator who was arrested? You also delved into his—his own history, as well, and found some interesting things. Could you talk about that?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: This translator had been a sort of mysterious figure for most of the story. He was in the custody of the Afghan intelligence service, so he had reportedly blamed the Americans for the deaths and disappearances. But no one was able to speak to him directly,

until I learned in August he was transferred to the main Afghan prison to await trial, and I managed to get in to see him. And as you can imagine, it was quite a—it was quite an extraordinary meeting. I walked in, and he came in, sort of tall, lanky, actually rather young-looking, though heavily bearded, speaking this kind of slangy American that translators learn from hanging out with American soldiers.

And he told me his story. He didn't admit to being involved in any of the killings, though we have multiple witnesses and a lot of evidence that suggests that he was. But he blamed it all on the Americans. He said that what had happened was that one of the—the team sergeant of this Green Beret A-Team, this 12-man team that had arrived, had been wounded, badly wounded, in a firefight at the beginning—at the end of October, beginning of November.

AMY GOODMAN: And his name was?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: This was Jeff Batson. He was the team sergeant for ODA 3124, which was this American Green Beret team that was deployed in Nerkh. So, what happens is, on a Green Beret A-Team, leadership is really led by—gained by experience, and that he was the most experienced. They call him the "team daddy," is a term on the Green Berets, a team—the father of the team. So his wounding must have been a traumatic event for these Green Berets. And that is what happened to set these incidents off, I believe. That's what Kandahari said. He said all the trouble started after Jeff was wounded.

AMY GOODMAN: Because they didn't have his guidance.

MATTHIEU AIKINS: I think that someone like that would have exercised leadership and authority and kept things under control. That's what a few of the different translators that I spoke to—Jeff was able to keep things under control.

But what's interesting is that another translator that I spoke to—again, I didn't use his name in the piece, because he agreed to speak with me on condition of anonymity—he had been with this unit in Nerkh, though after the incidents that occurred. He came later, after Kandahari had already fled. And he had also been deployed with them on an earlier mission in Uruzgan province in southern Afghanistan. He said that Zikria, whose nickname was Jacob, had killed people before, that he had killed prisoners before, that he had killed, in particular, in front of him,

a mullah who had been detained at Fire Base Cobra in Uruzgan province by this A-Team, ODA 3124. He took this mullah outside. He was supposed to release him. The team said to release him. Instead, he shot him in the face, in the bazaar in front of the—in front of the fire base. And he says that the A-Team knew about this, that Batson actually scolded him, saying, "Don't do this kind of crazy things." And yet, he was still a part of the team; he was asked to come back. So, it really raises the question of how much this has happened in the past.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: Now, you talk also about the relationship between the Afghan translators and U.S. forces, the sort of a wink and a nod sometimes of U.S. forces toward the special atrocities of the Afghans. Could you expand on that, as well?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Yeah, I mean, the translator—the relationship with the translators, they're not supposed to be armed. They're not armed in regular Army units. But the Special Forces get to do what they want, and so they arm their Afghan interpreters, give them weapons, so they kind of gain that Special Forces swagger. Now, in the case of translators, in the case of just the relationship with Afghan security forces, in general, what we see in Afghanistan is this kind of pattern of a wink and a nod, where U.S. forces are often tacitly complicit in the abuses carried out by their Afghan allies—torture in custody, extrajudicial executions—in the name of suppressing the insurgents and in gathering intelligence. So, this, I think, has to be seen in the context of that larger pattern.

AMY GOODMAN: So, talk about where this all stands now. You say the interpreters are called "terps." They are—the U.S. military—trying to distance themselves from the one man who's been arrested, Zikria—

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Yeah.

AMY GOODMAN: —Kandahari, who's in prison right now. And yet you're tracing his relationship with these A-Team soldiers on Facebook.

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Yeah. What was remarkable with this story is actually how much research I was able to do just on Facebook. I mean, people—these Afghan interpreters and the Special Forces guys have kept in touch between deployments. They were writing comments to each other. They were posting photos. Ultimately, those photos allowed me to identify a lot of the

members of the team and actually construct, as I write in the piece, a sort of photo array, like police investigators do, where you mix random images of people with the people that you're interested in, and you show them this grid to these witnesses and victims, and if they can identify them, that means that they've really seen them. So—

AMY GOODMAN: And you got some of these pictures from Facebook.

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Exactly, yeah, I got them all from Facebook. So, one of the interesting things is, the U.S. military has definitely tried to disavow Kandahari. They said—they claim, I think, astonishingly, that he was an unpaid interpreter, a sort of killer intern. And they say that he escaped on December 14th, that he ran away; they tried to bring him to justice, but they didn't know anything about him. Well, I found on Facebook that they were actually chatting and joking with Kandahari, even after the bodies started showing up in April. Some of the Green Berets, you know, liked his comments, thanked him, posted photos of themselves with him, well after all these incidents—the allegations, at least—had come to light.

AMY GOODMAN: So how has the—have the families reacted? Explain the actual scene of digging, when they discovered these bodies, once the A-Team had left, right outside of the base.

MATTHIEU AIKINS: They had heard—they had heard from a police officer who was friendly with some of the interpreters that there had been—might be bodies buried inside the base. So they actually petitioned the Ministry of Defense, because the Afghan army took over the base, to dig inside. The Ministry of Defense officials came with an excavator. They spent a bunch of time digging inside the Special Forces base, after the Americans left, and didn't find anything. The officials accused them of lying, said there's no bodies. Then, about a week later, a shepherd actually discovered human remains nearby the base. And over the period of two months, these remains started showing up.

It's quite—quite sad, because the families would come every time they found bodies. Many of these bodies were in such horrific condition. They had been burned or mutilated or partially destroyed, scavenged by animals. And they would, by the articles of clothing and items, personal items that were on the bodies, try to identify who was who. Now, that's part of the problem with the story, is that because there was no DNA testing carried out, we can't be certain of the identities of these 10 sets of remains. But based on clothing and personal effects, the families identified them.

AMY GOODMAN: And things like watches.

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Things like watches, things that are not common in Afghanistan. There's not [inaudible] material possessions in these little farming valleys, so it's actually easier to identify someone by this watch that they have.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: But presumably the United States military would have the capacity to do the DNA testing, even now, to find out the actual identities of the folks, you would think, or at least get a better idea of who was—how they were killed or how they died, wouldn't they?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Yes, but the U.S. military hasn't been interested in doing any of that, until now. And perhaps, if they are going to do a proper investigation, then absolutely they should exhume these corpses, they should do proper forensic investigations on them, and they should do DNA testing to conclusively establish their identity.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: And what's happened with the interpreter?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: The interpreter is still awaiting his fate.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: No trial yet?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Yeah. He's still in prison in Afghanistan. He's being charged with crimes against the state and treason.

AMY GOODMAN: The ISAF and CIA have a joint program called OMEGA. What is it?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: So this is a larger context sort of thing. Well, I discovered in the course of my research that joint military operations between ISAF and the CIA are governed by a program called OMEGA, right? So when the CIA paramilitary teams go out with ISAF units, whether it's air support, whether it's joint ground operations, this is what they're governed under.

Now, in 2011, the end of 2011, the U.N. released this really comprehensive report on torture in Afghan prisons, right? And ISAF—finding that it was widespread. And ISAF, citing legal obligations, ceased transferring into Afghan prisons where it thought there was the most egregious examples of torture. The CIA did not. And according to interviews and documents, last year the OMEGA program actually broke down over disagreements between ISAF and CIA, because ISAF was concerned that during these joint operations the CIA would end up transferring people into these six designated CTPT, which is the Counter Terrorism Pursuit Team, which is the name of the CIA's militias, facilities, which include some of the worst locations associated with torture—in Kandahar and notorious Department 124 in Kabul.

So it really shows just how much these forces, these Special Forces, the CIA, operate under much less strict rules of oversight and accountability. And that really poses an interesting question for what happens after 2014.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: And how difficult was it for you to ferret out over a five-month period the details of what happened here? Obviously, an American reporter going into this Afghan village to ask about what the Americans had done might have been—might not have encountered the most willing witnesses to talk to you.

AMY GOODMAN: Begin with your trip there.

MATTHIEU AIKINS: Well, the, you know, incidents take place only about a half-hour's drive—the provincial capital is only a half-hour's drive from Kabul, but it's like you're in a different world there. We almost got hit by a truck bomb that blew up the intelligence compound nearby, blasting out the windows onto myself, my translator and poor Omar. Then, when we actually tried to go to the district, we had to go with an Afghan army convoy, because the Taliban is on the road there. And we got ambushed and shot at and had to lay in a ditch for half an hour while the Afghan army fended off this ambush. So, the area is really, really difficult to get to. And it's amazing because it's right at the gates of Kabul, practically.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: And what about the response of the villagers when you—

MATTHIEU AIKINS: They were—they were not really interested in talking at first. They had heard from a lot of reporters. The incidents were, you know, months old by this time. And they saw no point in speaking to me. They didn't have any faith in the, you know, capacity of some foreign reporter to bring them justice. And perhaps—perhaps I won't. But I guess I managed to, just by hanging out with them, by spending five months on this, convince them to once again tell their stories in a much more deep way than they had done before.

AMY GOODMAN: And where is the [A-Team] now?

MATTHIEU AIKINS: The A-Team is in Fort Bragg. And I assume that they're probably in some kind of quarantine while they're waiting for the results of this criminal investigation.