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We speak with journalist Lynzy Billing, whose investigation for ProPublica details how CIA-backed death squads, known as Zero Units, have yet to be held accountable for killing hundreds of civilians during the U.S. War in Afghanistan. The Afghan units, which were routinely accompanied by U.S. soldiers, became feared throughout rural Afghanistan for their brutal night raids, often descending upon villagers from helicopters and carrying out summary executions before disappearing. Families of victims continue to demand answers, but since the operations were directed by the CIA

rather than the military, there is almost no oversight or disclosure when things go wrong. “Many people I spoke to feel that these operations ... were counterproductive and actually had turned their families against the U.S.-backed government in Kabul and against the U.S.,” says Billing.

AMY GOODMAN: This is *Democracy Now!*, [democracynow.org](#), *The War and Peace Report*. I’m Amy Goodman, with Nermeen Shaikh.

Deadly night raids based on faulty U.S. intelligence, then covered up by a classified war loophole, this is the focus of a major new [investigation](#) by reporter Lynzy Billing into CIA-backed Afghan special forces called “Zero Units,” which left a trail of civilian deaths across Afghanistan but have yet to be held accountable after the U.S. ended its two-decade-long occupation.

Lynzy Billing initially returned to Afghanistan to find out more about the deaths of her own mother and sister nearly 30 years earlier, but started to focus on the Zero Units’ night raids when she first heard eyewitness testimony. Over the next four years, she visited the sites of more than 30 raids in Afghanistan and interviewed hundreds of people, including survivors and families of victims. She also spoke to soldiers inside the Zero Units, who were the men tasked with killing their own compatriots on U.S. orders.

In this clip from a forthcoming ProPublica documentary, two of them, Baseer and Hadi, describe their work in 2019 in Afghanistan’s Logar province near the Forward Operations Base Shank. To protect their safety, their words are spoken by actors.

BASEER: [translated] I am a member of Afghanistan’s Zero Unit in the east of the country. As intelligence comes in, the raid is conducted. It is our commander who gives us information.

HADI: [translated] We just have the shooting order.

AMY GOODMAN: Those are two soldiers with the so-called Zero Units in Afghanistan, describing their work to reporter Lynzy Billing in her new [exposé](#) for ProPublica, “The Night Raids.” She’s joining us now from Istanbul, Turkey. She’s an investigative journalist who’s been reporting on Afghanistan since 2019. Born in Afghanistan, she is a British journalist.

We welcome you, Lynzy, to *Democracy Now!* Can you talk about, lay out the findings of your piece, just who these Zero Units are, and, in fact, you going there not exactly to investigate this story, but actually your own family and what happened to them?

LYNZY BILLING: Yeah. Thank you for having me.

This story really started in early 2019 when I went back to Afghanistan to look into my past and what had happened my family. And it was in Nangarhar province in the east of the country where I had met a distant relative, and I was investigating the death of my mother in a raid there that had happened decades earlier, where I met a woman called Mahzala. And she was a widow, and she was in her fifties, and she was by herself, because she was telling me this story of a night raid that had killed her two only children. And after meeting her and seeing this — she was just at a complete loss as what to do, and she really kind of turned to me as a foreigner to help her try to understand what had happened to her sons.

And so, after hearing her story, I just felt this huge responsibility to look into who was conducting these operations in remote and rural areas of Afghanistan. And that’s when I kind of stumbled across the Zero Units, which are squadrons of Afghan special forces who were trained and funded and equipped by the CIA, and who were joined on their operations by

American special operations forces members also, and, at times, depending on the operation, CIA

advisers. And these were counterterrorism operations. The Zero Units were sent after perceived threats against the United States, so, first, Taliban and, in later years, ISKP

also. And so, I started just hearing more and more reports of people who — from people who had lost loved ones in these operations. And I started to realize that they — while at some times they were successfully targeting militants, that they were also getting it wrong.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: And, Lynzy, what did you learn about why — when the units were established, how many units there were, how many Afghans and American special forces were members of these units? And then explain why you chose to focus on one of them, 02.

LYNZY BILLING: Yeah, so, there's four known Zero Unit squadrons, and they're based regionally across the country. And as you say, I focused on the 02, which was in the east. In Nangarhar, their base is in Jalalabad, but they were also going on operations in neighboring provinces also.

And I started to focus on the 02 because the more and more reports that I kept hearing of civilian casualties and botched operations, it was just a huge number coming from the 02, and also because I was in Nangarhar initially, and there was — I just felt like there was pockets of Nangarhar that were, at that time, when this all started in early 2019, that they were not being reached by a lot of media reporters. They were really inaccessible areas. And there was this increase in fighting going on, and it was really a hot spot for these operations. When it started, they were going out nearly every night. So, it was really tracking these operations in real time.

And that's why I really felt like I needed to speak with soldiers who were inside the 02. And I wanted to understand from them why they were going on these operations on U.S. orders and why they were targeting their own countrymen. How did they feel when they went wrong?

And, I mean, these were huge operations. These are, you know, 80 men on a night raid, of which 10 to 12 Americans were often joining, they were telling me, and huge convoys. They had access to air power, as well, U.S. air power. And there was just — they were so active in Nangarhar, and everyone knew who the Zero Units were. They knew what they wore. They knew how — they were very greatly feared. And yet they didn't know who was behind them or who was compiling the intelligence, who was building these targeting packages and sending

them out to target what was turning out to be students, university students, teachers and farmers. And so, people were really left without answers to what was happening on these operations.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: And, Lynzy, explain — I mean, you actually managed to speak to these two. We played a clip earlier of Baseer and Hadi. How did you get them to speak to you, first of all? And what was especially striking to you about what they said in your conversations with them?

LYNZY BILLING: I think it was — it was probably about six months after I started looking for soldiers inside the 02 to talk to that I first met Baseer and Hadi. And at first, they were hesitant to talk to me. They didn't quite understand why I wanted to talk to them. And I guess, over time, there was — they began to trust me and that I did want to hear their perspective on what they were doing, and also their background, which played a big role into why they joined these operations — these units initially. And they really kind of started opening up over time.

And there was a lot of pain and guilt with what they were doing, and also a lot of confusion as to their role within this setup and this structure of the Zero Units, who were nominally under the Afghan intelligence agency but were under the umbrella of the CIA program, as well. And they really — I think, initially, there was one — I remember one specific meeting where they told me about one operation that had killed civilians and that had not resulted in finding the Taliban that they were looking for in that operation, and this kind of frustration, from their part, where they weren't the ones who could talk about it, and they were not writing up the after-action reports. It was a senior commanding officer who was doing it. And they weren't sure if anyone was even going to find out about the civilians killed in these operations. It was something out of their hands. Yeah.

AMY GOODMAN: Lynzy, you spoke to a man named Spin Ghar, who says he was shot three times when he was 12 years old by two soldiers, two soldiers outside their base in Jalalabad.

LYNZY BILLING: Yeah. And Spin Ghar was — I met Spin Ghar just this last year, actually, by coincidence. And this was — you know, the U.S. had now left Afghanistan, and so much had changed over the course of this investigation, and very quickly, for everyone. But he was really — he really stuck with me, because when I met him, he had received — he had been shot, as you say, three times outside his home, which was right next to the base in Jalalabad, the 02 base. And he had been encouraged to, you know, file papers for compensation, or a

compensation claim. And he, for his injuries, had been treated at the base in Jalalabad and also Bagram base. And he had filed these papers, and he had received a letter back. And it was written in English, and he didn't speak English — he didn't read English. And it had declined to give him compensation for his injuries. And he had been waiting so long to hear if he was going to get this compensation for what had happened in this — on that occasion.

And he really stuck with me, because this is long after the U.S. has left. And there were still people in Afghanistan who are waiting to hear back on promises of compensation and things they had been encouraged to pursue. And this operation targeted him when he was 12, although on the form it was written that he was 14. But he just felt like this really, like, telling symbol, for me, as to what really was left behind.

AMY GOODMAN: So, I wanted to ask you about who is behind these Zero Units, and particularly why, for example, that these raids are conducted by the CIA and not the military, what kind of loophole and lack of reporting, investigation or accountability that leads to.

LYNZY BILLING: Well, there's a very — it's a very murky area that these units fall into, precisely, as you say, because they are not U.S. military counterterrorism operations. Because they fall under the CIA, they don't fall under the usual U.S. law that would apply to the military or Title 10. And the U.S. special operations forces soldiers joining these operations also don't fall under the same U.S. laws, because these are now covert action operations. This is Title 50. So there is this complete legal loophole into them not receiving the same oversight and scrutiny that U.S. military operations would.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: And, Lynzy, talk about — I mean, you also spoke to a U.S. Army Ranger, who told you — who conceded that these night raids had terrible effects, though he said that they were preferable to airstrikes, saying to you, “You go on night raids, make more enemies, then you gotta go on more night raids for the more enemies you now have to kill.” So, you spoke to him. You also look, in the piece, at the historical antecedents, the use by the U.S. of night raids. What did you understand about why Americans, the U.S. military and CIA, use this particular method, and have for decades?

LYNZY BILLING: Yeah, I mean, they've been using it for decades, using the night raid strategy since 1967, when they were doing these operations, or capture-kill operations, against

the Viet Cong in South Vietnam, and through Iraq, in which they were claimed as having major successes in targeting insurgencies and militants. And yet that's not the result that we see through our reporting, and that's not the result that came out afterwards. But it was this repeatedly used strategy that has failed time and time again, and that has not had a full accounting of it or what the fallout from these operations is.

AMY GOODMAN: And finally, what you feel, speaking to so many people, their attitude toward the United States with the number of deaths that have not been held accountable? And are families applying? Do they know ways to reach out?

LYNZY BILLING: I mean, this is really — yeah, I mean, this is really the legacy that America has left behind in Afghanistan. Many people I spoke to feel that these operations had actually had the reverse — were counterproductive and actually had turned their families against the U.S.-backed government in Kabul and against the U.S. And they will — if the same strategy is used in new conflicts and new wars, without someone looking at the tactics and saying, “What are the failures of this here? We're having failures of intelligence,” then they will have the same fallout in other countries, and you will see a blowback, the same as you have in Afghanistan, which is the way that people view the U.S., precisely because of witnessing years of these operations.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: And, Lynzy, finally, you conclude your [piece](#) by saying, “In the end, I got closure for my own personal story from the unlikely source: Baseer.” Explain what you found out, what happened to your mother and to your sister, and why you say that Baseer provided you with this closure.

LYNZY BILLING: I didn't get all the answers that I was looking for with what had happened to my family. But I do feel and I think that that is really, in part, something that we see in Afghanistan in general, which is that one family's loss and tragedy is replaced by another as one war bleeds into the next and it gets covered up. And so, what happened to my family was so long ago now, and then what happened with the families I was meeting in 2019, up — you know, over the last few years, was a recent conflict.

But they — I think that, with Baseer, the reason I felt some level of closure with it was because, although he hadn't targeted my family and he hadn't killed them, there was an understanding from him that kind of surfaced over time and through our regular meetings and conversations over time, this understanding that he had of what the real, true human cost of these operations

was and how everyone was affected, from the families and survivors through to the soldiers conducting these operations also. And so, there was something about him reaching that understanding that helped me feel — it really loosened a little something in me to feel a bit of closure with seeing that kind of remorse of what he had done.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, Lynzy Billing, we want to thank you so much for being with us, investigative journalist who’s been reporting on Afghanistan since 2019. We’ll link to your [piece](#) in ProPublica that’s headlined, simply, “The Night Raids.” Lynzy was speaking to us from Istanbul, Turkey.