

Brutal beheading

AFGHANISTAN | Afghan terror advances ahead of President Obama's pullout plan | *Mindy Belz*



SCREEN CAPTURE FROM VIDEO

Afghans are warning of dire consequences for the country's tiny Christian population should American forces leave Afghanistan, as President Barack Obama prepares to announce his plans for a troop drawdown in a televised address to the nation scheduled for Wednesday evening.

"If U.S. troops are not in Afghanistan the Taliban will come to power," said Obaid S. Christ, an Afghan Christian exiled to India who spoke to me Tuesday. "We will have the same situation we had in the 1990s when the Russians left Afghanistan, when we had civil war and millions killed."

The exile, who changed his name and fled Afghanistan in 2007 after an Islamic court issued an arrest warrant following his conversion to Christianity, acknowledged that the U.S.-backed government headed by President Hamid Karzai has been no friend to Christian converts either. Earlier this year two civilian courts sentenced to death jailed Afghan Christians for changing their religion. After international pressure, including personal visits to one jail by U.S. and European diplomats, the two were released and allowed to leave the country. Both now reside in Europe.

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But a more recent, gruesome incident makes clear that the danger for anyone turning from Islam in Afghanistan is not over. A video released in recent weeks, and made available to WORLD this week by two separate Afghan sources, shows four Afghan militants beheading a man believed to be a Christian in Herat Province.

The militants, who claim to be Taliban, captured the victim, a man in his 40s named Abdul Latif (according to Obaid Christ, who provided translation of the video), earlier this year from his village outside Enjeel, a town south of Herat.

In the two-minute video, the men, wearing explosive belts (or suicide vests) and kaffiya head scarves to cover their faces, recite verses from the Quran while forcing Latif to the ground and pinning him with their feet. “You who are joined with pagans . . . your sentence [is] to be beheaded,” read one of the militants in Farsi from what looked like a paper decree. “Whoever changes his religion should be executed.” The passages refer to Sura 8:12 (“I will instill terror into the hearts of the Unbelievers: smite ye above their necks . . .”) and the hadiths, or sayings of Mohammed.

As Latif fought his captors from the ground, one of the militants thrust a medium-sized blade into the side of his neck. With blood flowing onto the ground the militants shouted “Allahu Akhbar” or “God is great” over and over until Latif was fully beheaded and his head was placed on top of his chest.

The brutal killing followed a now-too-familiar pattern used in other beheadings captured on video, notably the killings of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl in Pakistan in 2002 and U.S. defense contractor Nick Berg in Iraq in 2004. It also likely coincided with a Taliban-incited mob attack on the UN compound in Mazar-e-Sharif in April that followed the March burning of Qurans in the United States by pastor Terry Jones’ church in Florida. After that incident an estimated 4,000 Afghans poured into the streets of Mazar and marched on the compound, killing 10 UN officials—and reportedly beheading two of them. That was followed by a May attack by the Taliban on the Provincial Reconstruction Team headquarters in Herat (at the time under Italian control), where they killed four and injured more than 38. Both cities until then were considered among Afghanistan’s safest, and slated to be the first areas turned over to all-Afghan control.

Despite the obvious uptick in violence in Afghanistan, President Obama is likely to tell the American people on Wednesday night that he will begin a drawdown of troops starting next month, with the final pullout possible next year or in 2013—earlier than a 2014 deadline agreement previously reached with Karzai.

Relations between the Obama team and the U.S.-backed Afghan government are plainly fraying in the lead-up to a drawdown. On Saturday Karzai made public that the United States had been negotiating with the Taliban. The next day, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates for the first time acknowledged “preliminary” U.S. talks with the militant movement that carried out a five-year reign of terror from 1996 until the U.S. invasion in October 2001.

Karzai also accused NATO forces of being in Afghanistan “for their own purposes, for their own goals, and they’re using our soil for that.” In an unusual retort, U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry responded, “When Americans, who are serving in your country at great cost—in terms of life and treasure—hear themselves compared with occupiers, told that they are only here to advance their own interest and likened to the brutal enemies of the Afghan people . . . my people, in turn, are filled with confusion and grow weary of our effort here.”

Many Afghans, like Obaid Christ, criticize the Karzai regime, but more fear the return of Taliban influence and renewed fighting among tribal groups. “At least you cannot fight with each other now,” said Christ. “Now you have people from different tribes in the government, but we don’t know what will come after.”