

THE AFGHAN MISSION: FROM CANADIAN CUSTODY INTO CRUEL HANDS

Ottawa kept abuse charges against Afghan ally secret

Kandahar governor accused of beating and electrocuting detainees in secret prisons

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The Harper government knew, but tried to keep secret since last spring, allegations that the governor of Kandahar was personally involved in torture and abuse of detainees.

The allegations against Governor Asadullah Khalid, appointed directly by President Hamid Karzai and a key political partner to Canada's nation-building efforts in southern Afghanistan, were regarded as sufficiently credible that senior officials in Ottawa were immediately informed and Canadian diplomats secretly reported them to the International Red Cross and Afghanistan's main human-rights group.

Government documents detailing the accusations were heavily censored by the government which, claiming national security, blacked out the references to "the governor." But multiple sources, both inside and outside the government, confirm that the words "the governor" have been censored as have whole passages referring to secret cells allegedly run by Mr. Khalid outside the official prison system.

Rumours have long linked Mr. Khalid to secret prisons. That he had close ties with U.S. intelligence agents and special forces had been known since Canadian troops arrived in southern Afghanistan in early 2006. But Ottawa didn't confront an accusation of the governor's direct involvement in the interrogation and torture of prisoners until it sent diplomats to inspect the main secret police prison in Kandahar on April 25, 2007.

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"Another prisoner beckoned to us," begins the crucial passages describing the first inspection of the secret National Directorate of Security police prison in Kandahar city.

The detainee, like others in the secret police jail, was in leg irons, according to the documents. He told the Canadians his name and described how he initially had been imprisoned for nearly a year, most of the time shackled alone in a room in one of the governor's private prisons. "He went on to state he had been interrogated by foreigners and the governor," said the report by Gavin Buchan, a Canadian diplomat and Linda Garwood-Filbert, the head of the Canadian Corrections team in Afghanistan.

"He alleged that the governor beat him and gave him electric shocks," Ms. Garwood-Filbert wrote in her inspection report. Eventually the

prisoner was moved to the NDS prison where he gave his account to Canadian officials.

Within days, senior Canadian diplomats had passed on the reports to both the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission.

Another document, marked "For AIHRC and ICRC eyes only" was used as a briefing note by Canadian diplomats at two meetings in early May.

One meeting was with the International Committee of the Red Cross; the other with the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. When the briefing note was finally made public late last year as part of the government's delivery of documents in the Federal Court case brought by Amnesty International Canada and the B.C. Civil Liberties Association, it also had the words "the governor" blacked out, multiple sources have confirmed.

Despite sharing the allegations with the Afghan government and outside agencies, Ottawa kept them from a Canadian Federal Court judge hearing a case brought by Canadian rights groups. It claimed the national security exemption.

Canada began follow-up inspections of detainees it transferred to Afghan custody after The Globe and Mail published a series of stories detailing accounts of torture and how internal documents showed that the government was aware abuse was rife in Afghan prisons.

Another diplomatic cable, dated April 26, the day after that first inspection uncovered the direct allegation, says "Governor Asadullah Khalid, in separate discussions, has noted his surprise and unhappiness at The Globe and Mail."

It remains unclear whether the allegation of torture against Mr. Khalid has ever been investigated, as is required under the new detainee-transfer agreement.

If there was an investigation, it may be one of the nine, bundled together, that were reported as "groundless" by the secret police in a conversation with Canadian diplomats last month. No details of any investigation were disclosed and the quality of the probes remains in doubt because Canada withholds the name of the accuser in passing along the allegations.

Canadian ministers continue to meet Mr. Khalid, but the Prime Minister broke with usual practice when he went to Kandahar less than a month after a prisoner told the Canadian diplomats that Mr. Khalid had tortured him.

In response to written questions, the government declined to directly confirm that it knew of the allegations against Mr. Khalid. However, when asked if Mr. Harper had raised "the governor's alleged personal involvement in the interrogation of detainee" in his talks with Mr. Karzai, the carefully worded response was: "The Prime Minister, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and National Defence, as well as Canada's Ambassador to Afghanistan have had a number of frank discussions with President Karzai on a range of issues, including the treatment of detainees." The government response also pointedly distanced Mr. Harper from Mr. Khalid in the period after April of 2007.

"As stated previously, the Prime Minister has met only briefly with Mr. Khalid in March, 2006, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs has never met Mr. Khalid. The Minister of National Defence raised Canada's concern about the treatment of detainees with Mr. Khalid in November, 2007," it

said.

It also sought to play down the first meeting. "During his first trip to Afghanistan in March, 2006, the Prime Minister was met at the Kandahar airfield briefly by Governor Asadullah Khalid and senior tribal elders. The Governor is the senior ranking government official in Kandahar and, as such, he would greet the Prime Minister upon his arrival in Kandahar." But that courtesy was omitted in Mr. Harper's May, 2007, visit, after the allegation of torture by the governor was reported to the ICRC by Canada.

Nevertheless, Mr. Khalid remains a key player in Kandahar and senior Canadian commanders and diplomats deal with him weekly. He is a regular visitor to the main Canadian base on Kandahar air field and Brigadier-General Guy Laroche and ambassador Arif Lalani routinely visit the governor's compound.

In Afghanistan's centralized government, governors are directly appointed. Mr. Karzai sent Mr. Khalid to Kandahar, the heartland of the Taliban, as governor in 2005.

Previously, Mr. Khalid had been governor of Ghazni. Mr. Khalid says he fought the Taliban alongside the famous Northern Alliance warlord Ahmad Shah Massoud, killed by al-Qaeda suicide bombers two days before Sept. 11, 2001. Mr. Khalid's age is not clear, although he appears to be in his late 30s or early 40s. According to some reports, he attended Kabul University but dropped out to fight the Taliban.

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