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US-AFGHANISTAN: McKiernan Gets Control of Disputed Raids

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WASHINGTON, Mar 20 (IPS) - U.S. Special Operations forces in Afghanistan, whose commando raids and airstrikes against suspected Taliban targets have caused large numbers of civilian casualties that have angered Afghans, have quietly been put under the "tactical control" of the commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, Gen. David McKiernan, for the first time.

An order issued Tuesday at the direction of CENTCOM chief Gen. David Petraeus gives McKiernan authority over all operations by Special Operations units stationed in the country, as Col. Gregory Julian, McKiernan's spokesperson, confirmed in an e-mail to IPS. The order, which has not been made public, modifies previous command arrangements which had excluded U.S. Special Operations forces from McKiernan's command authority.

Although the order follows a period of rising Afghan protests against Special Operations raids, there is no indication that Petraeus intends for the change in command arrangements to bring about any fundamental change in such raids.

Nevertheless, it appears that those raids have become a political hot potato, which Petraeus prefers to be in McKiernan's hands rather than his own, particularly as Afghanistan heads into a politically charged period leading up to a presidential election in August.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai is certain to make his criticism of such raids and their cost in civilian deaths an issue during the campaign.

In December, Karzai complained publicly about two such Special Operations raids in Khost and Zabul provinces, one of which the U.S. military admitted had been a "tragic case of mistaken identity" that had resulted in the killing of civilians.

A United Nations report released in February blamed such raids as part of the reason for a major increase in civilian deaths in Afghanistan in 2008.

The rise in criticism apparently led the Special Operations command in Afghanistan to reduce the number of those attacks briefly last month. Vice-Adm. William H. McRaven, the head of the Combined and Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan (CJSOTF-A), had ordered a dramatic reduction in the raids for two weeks beginning in mid-February, according to a report in the New York Times Mar. 10.

But the targeted raids have now returned to their normal level, which may be as many as dozens per week, according to the Times. U.S. officials claimed to the Times that the military had adopted new procedures aimed at reducing civilian casualties, but failed to provide any specifics about what those procedures were.

The new order is the latest indication that neither McKiernan nor Petraeus, who is his boss, have been eager to take responsibility for the Special Operations raids and their human and political consequences.

The day before the order was issued Col. Julian told IPS in an e-mail that Special Operations units were already operating as though such an order were in effect. They had begun operating on that basis ever since the USFOR-A (U.S. Forces-Afghanistan) headquarters was established Oct. 2, 2008, said Julian.

However, McKiernan had shown no evidence of being ready to exercise command authority over the Special Operations forces' commando raids and air strikes against suspected Taliban targets after the establishment of that command. In mid-October, two weeks after the new command was officially created, John Burns of the New York Times reported that a new directive from McKiernan to field commanders applying the more restrictive NATO policy on air strikes did not apply to the Special Operations forces in Afghanistan, because they were not under McKiernan's command.

And last week, Col. Julian confirmed that a lull in the Special Operations raids had occurred in February, but denied that McKiernan had issued the order, again implying that they were not under his authority.

Both incidents suggest that McKiernan was content to have the CJSOTF-A, which comes directly under the command of CENTCOM, continue to carry out plans for the controversial targeted raids without his reviewing them in advance.

But Petraeus apparently prefers to have McKiernan bear the direct responsibility for operations that are likely to generate even greater Afghan and international outrage over the continued killing of civilians. In the absence of Tuesday's order, Petraeus's command authority over the Joint Special Operations headquarters in Afghanistan would have put him squarely in the line of fire were the raids to become a major political issue.

The order, however, puts Gen. McKiernan between Petraeus and the issue.

The U.S. command in Afghanistan has not always been so tolerant of killing of innocent civilians by Special Operations forces commando raids and airstrikes as it is now. The commander of all U.S. forces in Afghanistan from 2003 to 2005, Gen. David Barno, imposed day-to-day control over Special Forces raids and ended targeted airstrikes altogether.

Col. David W. Lamm, who served as chief of staff for Barno in Afghanistan, recalled in an interview with IPS that Barno had exercised "veto authority" over strikes against Taliban targets by Special Operations forces. "We had a SOCOM [Special Operations Command] liaison officer in our HQ who briefed Barno every day," said Lamm, now chief of staff of the Near East South Asia Centre for Strategic Studies at the National Defence University.

As reported by IPS last October, Barno ordered an end to targeted airstrikes in early 2004. Now director of the same centre, Barno explained that he had decided to stop the use of pre-targeted air strikes because the civilian casualties they caused were "strategically decoupling us from our objective," said Barno. "It caused blowback that undermined our cause."

Such targeted airstrikes were resumed after Barno was replaced by Gen. Karl Eikenberry in 2005. Eikenberry was nominated by President Barack Obama last week to become the next ambassador to Afghanistan.

Lamm said he believes the tactical control over Special Forces operations was lost when the command in Afghanistan technically became part of a NATO operation in 2006. The result of that loss of control, said Lamm, was that Special Operations teams would "go and do something, and the Afghans or U.S. forces then have to go in and deal with the second and third order effects of their operations."

Barno believed that killing local Taliban leaders might not have significantly reduced the Taliban's capabilities. The Taliban organisation was "like a starfish, not like a spider," Barno argued. "Even if you killed the leadership - except for the very top guys - they would be quickly replaced."

Barno's conclusion about the questionable value of targeted attacks on the Taliban was confirmed in a recent classified study of intelligence operations in Iraq and Afghanistan by the Rand Corporation, prepared for the U.S. Joint Forces Command, which was based on interviews with more than 90 U.S. and allied military officers and intelligence experts.

The study, revealed by Wikileaks last month, quoted one intelligence specialist as saying, "We also spent a lot of time, money, blood, and treasure on going after MVTs [medium-value targets] and HVTs [high-value targets]... and I don't think it had a great deal of effect on the Taliban because they are not hierarchical. If we killed one guy, they just replaced him in about 10 minutes."

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