

# AFP EXCLUSIVE: Taliban use child sex slaves to kill Afghan police

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**TARIN KOT, Afghanistan** - The Taliban are using child sex slaves to mount crippling insider attacks on police in southern Afghanistan, exploiting the pervasive practice of "bacha bazi" -- paedophilic boy play -- to infiltrate security ranks, multiple officials and survivors of such assaults told AFP.

The ancient custom is prevalent across Afghanistan, but nowhere does it seem as entrenched as in the province of Uruzgan, where "bacha bereesh" -- or boys without beards -- widely become objects of lustful attraction for powerful police commanders.

The Taliban over nearly two years have used them to mount a wave of Trojan Horse attacks -- at least six between January and April alone -- that have killed hundreds of policemen, according to security and judicial officials in the province.

"The Taliban are sending boys -- beautiful boys, handsome boys -- to penetrate checkpoints and kill, drug and poison policemen," said Ghulam Sakhi Rogh Lewanai, who was Uruzgan's police chief until he was removed in a security reshuffle in April amid worsening violence.

"They have figured out the biggest weakness of police forces -- bacha bazi," he told AFP.

The assaults, signifying abuse of children by both parties in the conflict, have left authorities rattled, with one senior provincial official who echoed Rogh Lewanai's view saying "it's easier tackling suicide bombers than bacha attackers".

The killings illustrate how bacha bazi is aggravating insecurity in Uruzgan, a remote province which officials warn is teetering on the brink of collapse, unravelling hard-won gains by US, Australian and Dutch troops who fought there for years.

"These bacha attacks have fuelled deep mistrust within police ranks," Seddiqullah, a police commander at a checkpoint near the provincial capital Tarin Kot, told AFP. The insurgents are using boys as honey traps, said 21-year-old Matiullah, a policeman who was the only survivor from an insider attack in Dehrawud district in spring last year.

He said the attacker was the checkpoint commander's own sex slave, a teenager called Zabihullah. Late one night, he went on a shooting spree, killing seven policemen including the commander as they slept.

"He brought the Taliban inside and poked all the bodies

with rifle butts to see if anyone was alive. I pretended to be dead," said Matiullah, who now works as a tailor, pointing out a gash on his forehead.

"As his Taliban accomplices gathered our weapons and ammunition, Zabihullah declared: 'Everyone is dead'."

## **- 'Addiction' to boys -**

The Taliban, who banned bacha bazi during their 1996-2001 rule, roundly denied deploying any underage boys for insider attacks.

"We have a special mujahideen brigade for such operations -- all grown men with beards," a Taliban spokesman told AFP.

The insurgents have long denied using children in combat, a claim repeatedly debunked by rights groups and the government.

Survivors of insider attacks who spoke to AFP, including Matiullah, suggest the Taliban are exploiting the institutionalisation of bacha bazi in police ranks for military gain.

Practically all of Uruzgan's 370 local and national police checkpoints have bachas -- some up to four -- who are illegally recruited not just for sexual companionship but also to bear arms, multiple officials said.

Some policemen, they said, demand bachas like a perk of the job, refusing to join outposts where they are not available.

Horrifying abuse at checkpoints makes the boys, many

unpaid and unregistered, hungry for revenge and easy prey for Taliban recruitment -- often because there is no other escape from exploitative commanders.

Many who have tried to escape have been dragged back with trumped up charges of Taliban links, two senior provincial judges told AFP.

Boys have also spurred a deadly rivalry between policemen, with officials reporting incidents such as a public gunfight this year between two commanders in Gezab district as one of them angrily accused the other of "stealing" his bacha.

"To restore security in Uruzgan, we will first have to separate policemen from their bachas," one of the judges said.

"But if they are told to reform their ways, a common reply is: 'If you force me to abandon my boy lover, I will also abandon the checkpoint'. The Taliban are not blind to notice that this addiction is worse than opium."

## - 'Male rape' -

Bacha bazi, which the US State Department has called a "culturally sanctioned form of male rape", peels away the masculine identity of boys in a society where the sexes are tightly segregated.

In conservative areas women are mostly invisible in public -- and often unattainable due to steep bride prices.

Bachas supplant the role of women, adopting a feminine gait and sometimes wearing makeup and bells on their

feet.

Many in Uruzgan see bacha bazi neither as paedophilia nor homosexuality, which is forbidden in Islam. If social norms had a pecking order, violating boys would be seen as far more ethical than violating women.

"Bacha bazi is pervasive sexual slavery of children, seen widely as a cultural practice and not a crime," Charu Lata Hogg, a director at London-based charity Child Soldiers International, told AFP.

"Since it is mostly practised by those in positions of power -- warlords, commanders, politicians -- it is hard to stamp out. It appears sustained partly by the fact that access to women is limited."

Insider attacks by child slaves have also been reported in recent years from neighbouring Helmand and Kandahar provinces, where bacha bazi is prevalent.

But the tactic appears more deep rooted in Uruzgan, where the boys are widely flaunted as a totem of affluence, with some officials openly displaying cellphone images to AFP of their "handsome bachas".

"Come see my beautiful bacha," said Naqibullah, a police commander in Dehjwze village near Tarin Kot, boasting that he had been holding the teenager for two years.

With a touch of kohl on his eyes, and bleached blond curly hair poking out of his embroidered hat, the boy sat in a corner of the checkpoint surrounded by opium farms, quietly refilling tea glasses for Naqibullah's guests.

**- 'Predatory behaviour' -**

"Commanders prowl neighbourhoods for young boys. We are scared of dressing up our children or buying new clothes that will make them attractive," said Nader Khan, a tribal elder in Dehrawud.

Khan's 13-year-old nephew was taken captive earlier this year by Naqibullah, a local commander not related to the Dehjwze official, when his family sent him to deliver bread for policemen. He was released only after angry tribal elders besieged the governor's office in Tarin Kot. Governor Mohammad Nazir Kharoti told AFP he ordered Naqibullah's arrest but he was released in less than a month because he was needed for combat duty.

"It is difficult to implement the law 100 percent when we are faced with a war situation," Kharoti said, without elaborating on the case.

Afghanistan's interior ministry refused to confirm or deny that bachas were being used in insurgent attacks, but said it was committed to police reforms and acknowledged that "bacha bazi within the ranks of police is a serious crime".

The practice has put the United States and its NATO allies, who have spent billions of dollars to build Afghan forces, in a precarious position.

The US Congress last year voiced concern over "predatory sexual behaviour by Afghan soldiers and police", prompting watchdog agency SIGAR to launch an investigation that is still ongoing.

The head of a government-affiliated agency in Uruzgan showed AFP two letters from the attorney general in

Kabul, one last year and another dated January, ordering a separate probe into sexual abuse and the illegal recruitment of child conscripts.

"We haven't been able to visit even one checkpoint to investigate," he said, speaking in hushed whispers in his own office.

"Do you think police commanders will leave us alive if we probe their crimes?"

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