

Motive for Aid Worker Killings in Afghanistan Still Uncertain

The killing of a team of eye medics, including eight Christian aid workers, in a remote area of Afghanistan last week was likely the work of opportunistic gunmen whose motives are not yet clear, the head of the medical organization said Thursday.

On Aug. 6, 10 medical workers were found shot dead next to their bullet-ridden Land Rovers. The team of two Afghan helpers and eight Christian foreigners worked for the International Assistance Mission (IAM). They were on their way back to Kabul after having provided medical care to Afghans in one of the country's remotest areas.

Afghan authorities have not been conclusive about who is responsible for the deaths nor the motivation behind the killings. In initial statements last week the commissioner of Badakhshan, where the killings took place, said it was an act of robbers. In the following days, the Taliban took responsibility for the deaths.

The Associated Press reported that a Taliban spokesman said they had killed them because they were spies and "preaching Christianity." Another Taliban statement claimed that they were carrying Dari-language Bibles, according to the news agency. Initially the attack was reported as a robbery, which IAM Executive Director Dirk Frans said was not true.

"There are all these conflicting reports, and basically our conclusion is that none of them are true," Frans told Compass. "This was an opportunistic attack where fighters had been displaced from a neighboring district, and they just happened to know about the team. I think this was an opportunistic chance for them to get some attention."

A new wave of tribal insurgents seeking territory, mineral wealth and smuggling routes has arisen that, taken together, far outnumber Taliban rebels, according to recent U.S. intelligence reports. Frans added that he is expecting more clarity as authorities continue their investigations. He has denied the allegation that the members of their medical team were proselytizing.

"IAM is a Christian organization—we have never hidden this," Frans told journalists in Kabul on Monday. "Indeed, we are registered as such with the Afghan government. Our faith motivates and inspires us—but we do not proselytize. We abide by the laws of Afghanistan."

IAM has been registered as a nonprofit Christian organization in Afghanistan since 1966. Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, a former political candidate, dismissed the Taliban's claims that team members were proselytizing or spying, according to the BBC.

"These were dedicated people," Abdullah said according to the BBC report. "Tom Little used to work in Afghanistan with his heart—he dedicated half of his life to service the people of Afghanistan."

Abdullah had trained as an eye surgeon under Little, 62, an optometrist who led the team that was killed last week. Little and his family had lived in Afghanistan for more than 30 years with IAM providing eye care.

IAM has provided eye care and medical help in Afghanistan since 1966. In the last 44 years, Frans estimates they have provided eye care to more than 5 million Afghans.

Frans said he doesn't think that Christian aid workers are particularly targeted, since every day there are many Afghan casualties, and the insurgents themselves realize they need the relief efforts.

"We feel that large parts of the population are very much in

favor of what we do,” he said. “The people I met were shocked [by the murders]; they knew the members of the eye care team, and they were shocked that selfless individuals who are going out of their way to actually help the Afghan people ... they are devastated.”

The team had set up a temporary medical and eye-treatment camp in the area of Nuristan for two-and-a-half weeks, despite heavy rains and flooding affecting the area that borders with Pakistan.

Nuristan communities had invited the IAM medical team. Afghans of the area travelled from the surrounding areas to receive treatment in the pouring rain, said Little’s wife in a CNN interview earlier this week, as she recalled a conversation with her husband days before he was shot.

Little called his wife twice a day and told her that even though it was pouring “sheets of rain,” hundreds of drenched people were gathering from the surrounding areas desperate to get medical treatment.

The Long Path Home

The team left Nuristan following a difficult path north into Badakhshan that was considered safer than others for reaching Kabul. Frans said the trek took two days in harsh weather, and the team had to cross a mountain range that was 5,000 meters, or 3 miles, high.

“South of Nuristan there is a road that leads into the valley where we had been asked to come and treat the eye patients, and a very easy route would have been through the city of Jalalabad and then up north to Parun, where we had planned the eye camp,” Frans told Compass. “However, that area of Nuristan is very unsafe.”

When the team ended their trek and boarded their vehicles, the armed group attacked them and killed all but one Afghan member

of the team. Authorities and IAM believe the team members were killed between Aug. 4 and 5. Frans said he last spoke with Little on Aug. 4.

IAM plans eye camps in remote areas every two years due to the difficulty of preparing for the work and putting a team together that is qualified and can endure the harsh travel conditions, he said. "We have actually lost our capacity to do camps like this in remote areas because we lost two of our veteran people as well as others we were training to take over these kinds of trips," Frans said.

The team of experts who lost their lives was composed of two Afghan Muslims, Mahram Ali and another identified only as Jawed; British citizen Karen Woo; German Daniela Beyer; and U.S. citizens Little, Cheryl Beckett, Brian Carderelli, Tom Grams, Glenn Lapp and Dan Terry.

"I know that the foreign workers of IAM were all committed Christians, and they felt this was the place where they needed to live out their life in practice by working with and for people who have very little access to anything we would call normal facilities," said Frans. "The others were motivated by humanitarian motives. All of them in fact were one way or another committed to the Afghan people."

The two Afghans were buried earlier this week. Little and Terry, who both had lived in the war-torn country for decades, will be buried in Afghanistan.

Despite the brutal murders, Frans said that as long as the Afghans and their government continue to welcome them, IAM will stay.

"We are here for the people, and as long as they want us to be here and the government in power gives us the opportunity to work here, we are their guests and we'll stay, God willing," he said.

Memorial

On Sunday, at his home church in Loudonville, N.Y., Dr. Tom Hale, a medical relief worker himself, praised the courage and sacrifice of the eight Christians who dedicated their lives to helping Afghans.

"Though this loss has been enormous, I want to state my conviction that this loss is not senseless; it is not a waste," Hale said. "Remember this: Those eight martyrs in Afghanistan did not lose their lives, they gave up their lives."

Days before the team was found dead, Little's wife wrote about their family's motivation to stay in Afghanistan through "miserable" times. Libby Little described how in the 1970s during a citizens' uprising they chose not to take shelter with other foreigners but to remain in their neighborhood.

"As the fighting worsened and streets were abandoned, our neighbors fed us fresh bread and sweet milk," she wrote. "Some took turns guarding our gate, motioning angry mobs to 'pass by' our home. When the fighting ended, they referred to us as 'the people who stayed.'"

"May the fruitful door of opportunity to embrace suffering in service, or at least embrace those who are suffering, remain open for the sake of God's kingdom," she concluded.

Concern for Afghan Christians

Afghanistan's population is estimated at 28 million. Among them are very few Christians. Afghan converts are not accepted by the predominantly Muslim society. In recent months experts have expressed concern over political threats against local Christians.

At the end of May, private Afghan TV station Noorin showed images of Afghan Christians being baptized and praying. Within

days the subject of Afghans leaving Islam for Christianity became national news and ignited a heated debate in the Parliament and Senate.

The government conducted formal investigations into activities of Christian aid agencies. In June IAM successfully passed an inspection by the Afghan Ministry of Economy.

In early June the deputy secretary of the Afghan Parliament, Abdul Sattar Khawasi, called for the execution of converts, according to Agence France-Presse (AFP).

“Those Afghans that appeared on this video film should be executed in public,” he said, according to the AFP. “The house should order the attorney general and the NDS (intelligence agency) to arrest these Afghans and execute them.”

Small protests against Christians ensued in Kabul and other towns, and two foreign aid groups were accused of proselytizing and their activities were suspended, news sources reported.

A source working with the Afghan church who requested anonymity said she was concerned that the murders of IAM workers last week might negatively affect Afghan Christians and Christian aid workers.

“The deaths have the potential to shake the local and foreign Christians and deeply intimidate them even further,” said the source. “Let’s pray that it will be an impact that strengthens the church there but that might take awhile.”