

**Rape Case Tests Afghan Justice**  
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It was in the early hours of the morning when a group of armed men stormed through a mud-walled compound and whisked young Lal Bibi away.

After being forced to marry one of her captors the next day in an illegal ceremony, Bibi, who says she's 13, spent the ensuing five days in a dark room being tortured, beaten, and repeatedly raped. Her ordeal ended a week after her capture when she was dumped, bruised and battered, outside her home in a remote village in northern Konduz Province.

Bibi's mother, who did not reveal her name, said she recognized the men as members of the local police. Several of the men, she said, pinned her and her husband down at gunpoint, while the others grabbed Bibi from behind.

"Local police came to my house with weapons and surrounded the house," she said "With orders from the local commander of the police force they dragged [and drove] my daughter away in a pickup truck."

Bibi, who is currently in a stable condition after receiving treatment at a local hospital, says the ordeal began after her cousin sexually assaulted the daughter of a local militiaman.

When the cousin fled the village, settling the score by punishing the alleged rapist was not an option, leaving Bibi vulnerable.

Despite not being involved in the incident, tribal justice dictates that payment, in some material form, be made to the victim's family.

Livestock, money, or a bride is among the acceptable payments.

When a settlement, known as badal, was rejected, Bibi says the wronged girl's father and several other relatives, including the commander of the militia, abducted her on May 17.

**'Death Sentence'**

Bibi says being raped is the same as a death sentence in Afghanistan, where women must be virgins in order to marry. Often, some families even kill daughters who have been sexually assaulted.

Bibi suggests that she will take her own life if authorities fail to prosecute the men.

"They took me by force," she said. "If I receive justice, that's good, otherwise I'm going to burn and kill myself."

Bibi's mother has also given authorities an ultimatum. She maintains that if the government fails to ensure justice she will kill Bibi in protest.

"Either you deliver us justice, or the blood of my daughter will be on your hands," she said. "Either you burn my daughter yourself, or I will throw petrol over her and burn her to get justice."

Mohammad Sharif Safi, the military prosecutor in Konduz, said an arrest warrant has been issued for about a dozen men, including Mohammad Isah, Bibi's cousin; Khodadad, whose daughter was assaulted and who has been accused of raping Bibi as revenge; Khodadad's brother Sakhidad, who was reportedly involved in the kidnapping; and Mohammad Nizami, the commander of the local police unit.

Safi said two of the suspects had been detained but declined to reveal their names. He said the suspects are all members of the Afghan Local Police (ALP), government-sponsored militias that are intended to provide security in remote villages across rural Afghanistan where the Taliban-led insurgency is strongest.

### Spotlight On Police

The Afghanistan National Army and National Police are expected to expand to a combined 352,000 personnel this year, but even that force cannot cover remote areas where the Taliban exerts most of its power. The ALP is supposed to help fill that gap as foreign troops prepare to leave by 2014.

Bibi's case has put the spotlight on the controversial ALP, a 13,000-strong force that is divided into some 80 units across Afghanistan.

The force, which has proved successful in some areas in Afghanistan's east and south, has come under increasing scrutiny amid reports of extortion and petty harassment of villagers but also of human rights abuses, including rape, arbitrary detentions, and forcible land grabs.

Safi says Bibi's case is just the latest in a long line of incidents involving the local militia in Konduz, where more than 10 local police have been arrested and charged since 2010, when the initiative was launched.

Bibi's case, which has sent shockwaves through the country, has prompted Afghan President Hamid Karzai to personally intervene.

During a meeting of the country's national security council on June 3, Karzai ordered the Interior Ministry to arrest the suspects and disarm the police unit in Konduz.

### Local Strongmen

In a statement released on the same day, the Interior Ministry confirmed that two men had been arrested in the case, but did not reveal that they were ALP members. It also said that a "young woman" had been "harassed" and not raped.

Karzai has long expressed concern over the ALP units, fearing that local strongmen may use the forces as independent militias. He initially resisted the idea of forming the ALP, which was brought up by Army General David Petraeus in 2010 when he was the top U.S. military commander in Afghanistan.

But after Petraeus promised that the Afghan government, under the umbrella of the Interior Ministry, would oversee control of the units, the Afghan president agreed.

But whether Karzai's order that the police unit be disarmed is enough to ensure the woman's safety and see that justice is served is an open question in this remote part of the country, where security is traditionally provided by locals and where the central government holds little sway.

According to political analyst Najib Mahmoud, many ALP units pay little heed to Kabul, with most being under the command of local strongmen, who act independently from the central government.

"In villages, the role of maleks [village leaders] and mullahs is very important," he said. "Warlords and people related to groups that fought during previous wars still control these villages. They have armed people that are associated or related to them. As you can see, they can do anything they want."

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