Mob Kills Eloped Lovers After Storming Afghan Police Station

February 13, 2017

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The New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/13/world/asia/nuristan-province-afghanistan-honor-killings.html?_r=0>

An armed mob that included relatives of a young woman who had eloped with her lover stormed a police station holding the couple in eastern [Afghanistan](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/afghanistan/index.html?inline=nyt-geo) over the weekend, then dragged the lovers off and killed them, officials and witnesses said.

The mob wounded three police officers, one of them seriously, the officials and witnesses said Sunday and Monday in providing accounts of the couple’s violent deaths, often called honor killings.

The woman, Fatiha, 18, was described as having been married against her will and eloping instead with a young man, Hedayatullah, believed to be in his early 20s, from a neighboring village in Wama District of Nuristan Province. But on Saturday the police caught and arrested the couple on suspicion of adultery.

Within hours an armed mob formed at the police station, led by Fatiha’s husband and his family, but also including her brothers and cousins, the officials and witnesses said.

The authorities said there were only 30 police officers at the station facing a mob of 250 to 300 heavily armed men. “If police had fired bullets at the people, a massacre could have happened,” said Hafiz Abdul Qayoom, the governor of Nuristan, claiming the police had no option but to surrender the couple to the mob, especially after three officers had suffered gunshot wounds from the angry crowd.

Enayatullah, the district governor in Wama, who like many Afghans uses only one name, said the couple were apparently killed soon after they had been taken out of the police station.

“We asked for additional police, but the road to the district was closed due to snow,” he said. “If the police had resisted more, a disaster would have taken place.”

Salam Khan, 22, a witness from Fatiha’s village, Sar-i-Pul, said he saw what had happened to the couple after the police surrendered them. “Some of Fatiha’s relatives, her cousins, were beating her with their fists and saying, ‘Why did you do this?’ Then her older brother got angry and shot her with a hunting rifle and her younger brother shot her with an AK-47. I don’t know how many bullets they fired,” Mr. Khan said, speaking by telephone from the remote village.

The man described by officials and witnesses as the woman’s husband, who was not identified, shot and killed Hedayatullah, with whom she had eloped, according to Mr. Khan.

Hedayatullah was described as a member of the National Directorate of Security, Afghanistan’s paramilitary intelligence service, who was stationed in the village.

It is common in many parts of rural Afghanistan for fathers to marry off their daughters without the daughter’s consent, even though both Afghan civil law and [Islamic Shariah law](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/s/sharia_islamic_law/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) require such consent.

The authorities, however, often side with the families, and [honor killings](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/world/asia/in-spite-of-the-law-afghan-honor-killings-of-women-continue.html) in cases where the girl refuses the marriage are common, although rarely publicized.

The Nuristan case recalled a 2014 case in which a young couple from Bamian Province eloped to escape an arranged marriage, but [last year fled to asylum](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/26/world/asia/afghan-lovers-asylum-new-york.html) in the United States to escape family retribution.

“Such cases happen a lot in Nuristan, but they don’t come into the media,” said Hawa Alam Nuristani, a member of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission from Nuristan.

This case came to attention because of the notoriety surrounding it and what Ms. Nuristani said was a high bride price paid to the girl’s father, reputedly 30 goats and seven cows. “In such cases when something goes wrong, people do not know other ways except killing, and women are not aware of their rights,” Ms. Nuristani said.

Governor Qayoom said he was sending a delegation to the district to investigate the crime. “People there are ignorant, just like what people did in Kabul with Farkhunda,” he said. He was referring to [a 2016 killing](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/27/world/asia/flawed-justice-after-a-mob-killed-an-afghan-woman.html) in which a female Islamic scholar was lynched by a mob over false rumors that she had burned a Quran.

As of Monday in the Nuristan case, no one had been charged or arrested in the fatal shootings of the couple or the shootings of the police officers.

Governor Qayoom said there had been reports of several recent cases of elopements in the district, so villagers were on the lookout for unaccompanied women. Saeedullah Payendazai Kamparwal, the chairman of the Nuristan provincial council and a native of Wama District, said Fatiha’s plan had been to climb the mountain above her house to a road on the other side, where Hedayatullah was awaiting her. Two young boys were suspicious after seeing her on her own, however, and they alerted police officers.

The Afghan police typically consider an unmarried couple alone together to be guilty of adultery or attempted adultery, and the couple were presumably arrested for that. They claimed to be married but the police could tell they were from different districts and therefore did not believe them, according to Mr. Kamparwal’s account.

Once word reached the families of the woman and her husband that she was being held, they formed the mob that stormed the police station, according to the authorities. “People said to the police, ‘Hand them over to us or we will raid the offices and break off relations with the government,’” Mr. Kamparwal said. The district is in a pro-government part of a province where the Taliban also have some control.

Saheb Dad Hamdard, the head of the Nuristan Journalists’ Shura, or council, cast doubt on claims that such large numbers of people had attacked the police station.

“How can anyone believe that 250 to 300 people attacked? Wama District in total has four villages. Where would 300 people come from?” he said. “And where did they get arms? There’s no armed group in the village.”

Mr. Hamdard suggested that the authorities had acquiesced in turning the couple over to the families. Others, however, said that in such rural areas of Nuristan Province, people are often heavily armed.