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Scores of bodies found in Pakistan's Swat valley

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Scores of badly tortured bodies have been found dumped in Pakistan's Swat valley, raising concerns that the Pakistani army is conducting a campaign of extra-judicial killings and brutality aimed at suspected Taliban militants that could sully the army's successful campaign against them. At least two mass graves for executed Taliban have been discovered, according to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, an independent organization. Separately, an Internet video emerged Friday that appeared to show Pakistani soldiers, likely in Swat, beating prisoners, including elderly men. The army announced an investigation into the recording. Pakistan's fearsome Taliban movement, based in the tribal area that borders Afghanistan, took over Swat, which lies just 100 miles from Islamabad, two years ago and conducted a brutal campaign of repression, beheading and bombing its way across the valley. The army began a counteroffensive in April this year and had the militants routed by the end of July. Then, bodies of suspected Taliban, many previously detained by the military, started to turn up at crossroads, on bridges and outside homes. By the first of September, according to Pakistani news reports, 251 corpses had been found, and local residents say the tally may have reached 400 by now. The killings seem to have the support of the local residents, who express anger at human rights activists who raise the issue. "Where were these champions of human rights when the Taliban would slit the throats of people in front of their women and children?" said Mohammad Ali, a hotel owner in Swat's main town of Mingora. "Even the Israelis have not done such bad things to the Palestinians as the Taliban did to us." The army denies executing prisoners, suggesting that the bodies belong to militants killed in combat or at the hands of citizens taking revenge on their tormentors. The military says the mass graves hold the bodies of injured Taliban who were killed by their own during their retreat - rather than leave them behind to give information to the authorities. Some of the bodies were found with their hands tied behind their backs, according to local news reports. A number of high-profile Taliban commanders also have turned up dead after the military had announced they were in custody. One example: Sher Muhammad Qasa, who residents said was paraded through the streets of Charbagh, a former Taliban stronghold, after he was captured on Sept. 16. Four days later, the army announced that he had succumbed to injuries sustained when he was detained. The residents asked that they not be identified for fear of military reprisals. Ayub Khan was taken away by the army one afternoon in early August, from his home in Swat's main town of Mingora, in front of his five young children, according to several people in the neighborhood. Nine days later, his body was dumped on a nearby bridge. He had been badly beaten. A single shot to the head had finished off the 42-year-old. Ayub Khan was a minor informer for the Taliban, according to some local residents. Some cases have disturbed local residents. The death of Akhtar Ali, a 28-year-old who ran a popular electrical repair store, is one of those. He was picked up from the street at around 4 p.m. on Sept. 1 at an army checkpoint in Mingora, said passers-by who saw him being taken away. His family was assured later that day that he would be released. But at 6 a.m. on Sept. 5 his corpse was dumped on the doorstep of the

family home, where many in the neighborhood saw it. Every inch of his body showed signs of abuse, including burns made with an iron and the marks of merciless beatings. He was not shot, just tortured to death. Friends and family insist he had no known Taliban links. A military spokesman in Swat, Col. Akhtar Abbas, denied that anyone in army custody has been killed. But he conceded that the army is conducting an internal investigation of Ali's death. Questions about the army's behavior in Swat intensified Friday with the airing on a number of Internet sites, including Facebook and YouTube, of a video that seemed to show soldiers kicking, punching and whipping prisoners while questioning them. The video shows soldiers and other prisoners looking on as the beatings take place. Screams and cries of "God" can be heard in the recording. The army said Friday that an "investigation has been ordered" into the video, and anyone guilty would be punished. The army's chief spokesman, Major General Athar Abbas promised that the findings of the inquiry would be made public. ON THE WEB The video on YouTube (you must be 18 to view it): <http://tinyurl.com/y8ea33p>

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