

# Christian aid group wants to stay in Afghanistan despite brutal killings

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The ten-member medical team killed in Afghanistan last month included a German, a Briton and six Americans who brought their varied skills in health care and in regional languages to remote parts of the poverty-stricken country. Several of the volunteers had spent years in such perilous missions.

All were shot to death August 5 while making their way back to Kabul. The Taliban claimed responsibility, accusing the workers of spying for the government and proselytizing for their sponsor, the International Assistance Mission, a Christian aid agency. Because some local officials suspect that common criminals may have carried out the attack, the U.S. embassy said the FBI was investigating the deaths in cooperation with Afghan authorities.

In a Kabul news conference on August 9, Dirk R. Frans, executive director of the IAM, denied that espionage or religious conversions were motives for the government-approved, two-week medical mission to Nuristan province. "Our faith motivates and inspires us, but we do not proselytize," Frans told reporters. "We abide by the laws of Afghanistan" that make proselytizing illegal.

The assault on foreign Christians was the largest since the 2007 kidnapping of 23 South Korean missionaries by the Taliban in Ghazni province. Two male hostages were killed before the South Korean government negotiated the group's release weeks later.

Asked if IAM would end its work in Afghanistan, Frans said the deaths left the organization "devastated," but that "as things stand now" IAM will not leave Afghanistan after having worked four decades there, according to the Associated Press. The group's commitment to the country was such, said Frans, that the families of five of the eight foreigners had chosen to bury their relatives in Afghanistan.

The IAM executive said that outside experts have called its security systems among the best in the country. "Secular consultants have been critical about our stated dependency on God for our security, wrongly assuming we left it all to prayer," he added. "When they checked our systems and way of working they have had next to no additional suggestions."

Frans noted that team leader Tom Little, 62, an optometrist originally from Delmar, New York, and United Methodist mission worker Dan Terry, 64, had both served in Afghanistan for 30 years and raised families there.

Little, working with the Noor Eye Institute, trained the former Afghan foreign minister and presidential candidate Dr. Abdullah Abdullah. As reported by the BBC, Abdullah described the IAM team as dedicated people and called the attackers "enemies of the Afghan people."

Terry's murder defies comprehension, said Thomas Kemper, chief executive of the United Methodists' Global Ministries agency. "He loved the country with a passion and worked tirelessly on behalf of its most marginalized communities," Kemper told United Methodist News Service.

David Wildman, an Afghanistan expert with the Methodist agency, added that Terry, who was adept in the country's regional languages, "understood the wisdom of poor communities." Terry and his wife, Seija, a nurse, raised their three daughters in the country. Wildman also noted that most humanitarian teams working in Afghanistan are not targeted despite the violence there.

Another victim was Glenn D. Lapp, 40, of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, who worked for the Mennonite Central Committee in relief efforts after the Katrina and Rita hurricanes hit states on the Gulf of Mexico. Though trained as a nurse, Lapp served in Afghanistan as manager of IAM's provincial ophthalmic care program, according to the Mennonite Central Committee.

Anticipating the end of his two-year term in October, Lapp wrote recently to MCC officials that he hoped his denomination could continue its peacemaking work in the country: "The main thing that [foreigners] can do is be a presence in the country—treating people with respect and love and trying to be a little bit of Christ in this part of the world." —compiled from news services