

Civilian death toll mounts in Afghanistan

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The US bombardment of Afghanistan has resulted in an estimated 300 civilian deaths, and hundreds of injuries. Moreover, a United Nations spokesperson described the humanitarian crisis in the country as “the most serious, complex emergency in the world ever”.

These claims were issued as the impoverished country was subjected to its twelfth day of bombardment on Thursday and amidst reports that US special forces had begun entering Afghanistan.

Pentagon officials admit firing more than 2,000 missiles and bombs in the course of their military campaign, including cruise missiles and cluster bombs. Washington claims that its firepower is directed against Osama bin Laden’s Al Qaeda network and the Taliban regime. Pentagon sources give a daily briefing on the number of alleged “terrorist training camps” that have been destroyed. But there is increasingly reliable evidence to show that many civilian areas, including schools, hospitals and entire neighbours have been bombed, whilst basic infrastructure—such as the country’s already primitive water and electricity supplies—has been decimated.

In the most notorious incident to date, an estimated 200 people were killed on October 11, when some 25 missiles and bombs wiped out the small village of Kouram, 20 miles to the west of Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan.

Initially, US sources denied American forces had attacked the village, which consisted mainly of mud huts. When the Taliban lifted the ban on foreign journalists entering the country, allowing a small number to visit the scene and the surrounding area, however, such denials became untenable. Journalists’ accounts and video footage showed the wreckage of a US bomb amidst a number of destroyed civilian homes. A US spokesman then alleged that the Taliban had moved the bomb to the site, but experts who said such a procedure was virtually impossible refuted this. Finally, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said that the number of casualties claimed was “ridiculous”, although he did admit to some loss of life.

According to a newspaper in Russia, the destroyed Kouram was apparently a GBU-32 JDAM (Joint Direct Attack Munition), which reportedly carries an explosive payload of up to 2000 lb (910 kg).

Journalists from Britain’s *Mirror* newspaper visited the village and reported “everywhere there was the stench of death and detritus of war. A woman’s foot lay in the street and the remains of an arm protruding from a pile of rubble. Houses were squashed. Dozens of animal carcasses littered the villages and fields”. At Jalalabad’s public hospital, they interviewed survivors, who told of losing many family members, including children. The paper carried photographs of young children severely injured in the raid.

Their accounts were backed up by other interviews with female survivors in the women’s ward at the same hospital. One woman told journalists that she had lost all her children. A 17-year-old girl, herself badly burned by the bomb, said that her mother-in-law, brother-in-law and his wife and children had all been killed. The reporters stressed that the interviewees were not pressurised into making their statements, and that no Taliban had been present at the time.

On Wednesday morning, several US bombs hit a Red Cross warehouse in northern Kabul, two miles from the capital’s airport. An Afghan security guard was injured. The Pentagon claimed that a U.S. Navy F/A-18 Hornet jet had dropped the 1,000lb bombs at 4:57am “on a series of warehouses believed to be used by the Taliban to store military equipment”, and denied that it had known the Red Cross was using the buildings.

An International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) official rejected the US account, stating that its warehouses were clearly marked by a red cross painted on the roof. “It is definitely a civilian target. In addition to that, it is a clearly marked ICRC warehouse,” said Robert Monin, head of the ICRC delegation in Kabul—now evacuated to Pakistan. At least 35 percent of the food and other equipment stored was destroyed by the bombing, Red Cross officials said. The ICRC’s Geneva

Headquarters has lodged a formal protest to the US.

Other humanitarian relief agencies have also been hit in air strikes on at least two other occasions. On October 8, US bombs struck the United Nations' de-mining agency in Kabul, destroying the compound, killing four staff and wounding four others. On October 15, shrapnel from US bombs pounding Kabul airport wounded an employee of the UN World Food Program (WFP), who was unloading grain at a nearby warehouse. The bombing halted what would have been the first Oxfam food delivery into the famine-stricken Hazarajat district of Afghanistan since September 11. Such a remarkable series of attacks prompted Human Rights Watch to state, "There is no evidence that the agency facilities were the intended targets".

The ICRC warehouse was struck on Wednesday as the US carried out its most intensive bombardment of Afghanistan. More than 100 planes were used in the biggest daylight bombing since the US action began, striking targets in all the main cities, including Kabul and Kandahar. US sources described the military escalation as a "clean up mode". In addition to the deployment of B52 aircraft, which were used in the carpet bombing of Vietnam, the latest raids saw the use of heavy airborne gunships for the first time. The heavily armed, low-flying Special Forces AC-130 Spectre gunships possess 105mm cannons and machine guns that can fire up to 1,800 rounds per minute. The aircraft were used against Taliban troops, many of whom have reportedly been press-ganged into fighting. But their deployment in urban areas, during daylight, meant that eyewitness accounts surfaced of civilians having to run for cover to escape the planes.

According to UN spokesman Hasan Ferdous a large bomb struck a boy's school in Kabul city centre during Wednesday's raids, but did not explode. It was not clear if pupils had been in the building at the time. "It was a direct hit. It is fused and could explode," Ferdous said, adding that a de-mining group were working to defuse the missile. A clinic was also reportedly hit, killing five people.

A Taliban spokesman said that the same day, US warplanes had attacked two trucks packed with Afghan refugees attempting to flee bombing raids on the town of Chunai, in southern Afghanistan. He claimed that a further 12 civilians in the town had died after bombs hit houses adjacent to a Taliban military barracks, and that 15 had been killed in other neighbourhoods. This report has yet to be independently verified.

In pre-dawn air strikes on Thursday, warplanes again hit

central Kabul, as well as other targets in Jalalabad and Kandahar. Reports indicate that a central neighbourhood near the presidential palace in Kabul was struck.

The intensive raids, and the use of special troop carriers, would seem to support claims made by Arabic newspapers that US ground forces have now entered the country. Iranian radio and television reported Thursday morning that US troops had entered Afghanistan by helicopter, and that there had been exchanges of fire between American and Taliban forces near Kandahar.

What is certain is that the US attack has intensified an already severe humanitarian crisis. According to the UN, the numbers of Afghan civilians attempting to flee the country is among the "biggest movements of human beings in history". Before the US action began, there were 3.5 million Afghan refugees in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. The UN estimates that a further one million people are now heading towards Pakistan, 400,000 are en route to Iran and a further 100,000 are trying to reach the former Soviet republics to the north.

Many of those fleeing are already severely malnourished. The UN's Children's Fund, UNICEF, said as many as 100,000 Afghan children could die this winter unless food reaches them in sufficient quantities. A UN spokesman described the US military's brief policy of airdropping food rations in Afghanistan—supposed to underline America's "humanitarian" concerns—as "catastrophic".

The international aid agencies have not condemned US military intervention outright, however, nor have they made a call for a total cessation of Western action. A joint statement released by several charities—Oxfam International, Britain's Islamic Relief, Christian Aid, Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, the Tear Fund and Action Aid—was limited to a call for a "pause" in the bombing to allow food supplies to be delivered before severe weather conditions set in. The UN estimates that 50,000 tonnes of food is needed in the next month to stop millions starving to death during the harsh Afghani winter. Just 10,000 tonnes have made it in the last month. Even this timid appeal was rejected by British and US government officials, however, who blamed the Afghan regime for the current crisis.



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