

Afghan death toll mounts as US warplanes hit civilian targets

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23 October 2001

As many as a hundred people were killed when US and British warplanes bombed and destroyed a hospital in the western Afghan city of Herat, the ruling Taliban government in Kabul claimed Monday. The Pentagon did not initially deny the report, which came after some of the heaviest air raids of the 16-day war, on the night of October 21-22. Doctors, nurses and patients were said to be among the dead.

Citing Taliban sources, the French news service Agence France Presse reported that the hospital in Herat was full of staff and patients when it was struck by a US bomb during an overnight raid on the city. The casualties were “very high,” AFP said.

Earlier the Afghan news agency Bakhtar reported that US planes bombed the Nawabad section of Herat, destroying five houses and killing eight to ten people.

Another attack Sunday left 18 dead and 35 wounded in Tarin Kot, capital of Uruzgan province north of Kandahar. Five separate attacks took place, and two health clinics were hit in the town.

The civilian death toll now stands at more than 1,000, according to reports issued by the Taliban government and verified at least in part by journalists working inside the country. Anecdotal accounts derived from interviews with Afghan refugees fleeing the war zone into Pakistan also confirm the claims of heavy damage to civilian targets and large loss of life.

The *Washington Post*, in two dispatches from its correspondent in Quetta, Pakistan, reported a huge surge of refugees from southern Afghanistan after the stepped up air strikes around Kandahar, with more than 3,500 crossing the border October 18. The refugees described widespread civilian casualties in Kandahar. The *Post* account concluded:

“As reports of civilian casualties and other mistakes mount in America’s war in the skies over Afghanistan,

a growing number of Afghans from different backgrounds and political persuasions are questioning whether the United States is conducting a war against terrorism and Afghanistan’s ruling Taliban militia or against the Afghan people.”

Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, Abdul Salam Zaeef, told a press conference in Islamabad Monday, “It is now clear that American planes are targeting the Afghan people.” He pointed to the remarkable series of “mistakes” by the US military, which has hit a UN demining office, a Red Cross warehouse, a World Food Program building and other clearly marked health care and relief facilities, culminating in the destruction of the second largest hospital in Herat, a large city near the border with Iran.

On October 17, six agencies called for a “pause” in the US bombing, warning that about 400,000 Afghans would run out of food within a month if aid deliveries are unable to proceed.

Unreported by either side in the war are the casualties among Taliban soldiers, who are increasingly the focus of the US and British attacks. There were intense air strikes against Taliban positions defending the key northwest city of Mazar-e-Sharif, and the first significant bombing of the major Taliban troop concentrations north of Kabul.

A Taliban government spokesman said that there were indications that US forces were using chemical and biological agents, with many wounded people suffering apparent poisoning. Abdul Hanan Himat of the Information Ministry told the British news service Reuters, “Today in my contact with doctors in Herat and Kandahar, they told me that they have found signs that Americans are using biological and chemical weapons in their attacks.” The same official told AFP, “There are signs of intoxication and doctors suspect

that it may be because of chemical or biological weapons.”

The Bush administration and the Pentagon, as they have since the air war began, dismissed all Taliban claims of civilian casualties as lies. There has been no official US estimate of civilian casualties, other than a ludicrous claim by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld that there have been only four confirmed deaths—those of four security guards killed when an American cruise missile slammed into the office of UN mine-clearing group in Kabul.

Top military officers in command of the air war made little attempt to disguise the savagery of the bombing campaign. Rear Admiral Mark Fitzgerald, commander of the aircraft carrier Theodore Roosevelt in the Arabian Sea, declared, “Our strategy has shifted from attacking operational targets such as airfields, air defenses, communication nodes, to tactical targets such as tanks and troops in the field that support the war-fighting capability. We are striking targets. We are killing people on the ground. That’s what war is all about.”

There was incontrovertible evidence of errant US bombing Monday, when four photographers for Western news services witnessed US fighter jets drop two bombs on positions of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. Two F-16s struck Northern Alliance observation posts, and the opposition soldiers asked the journalists to “call the Americans and tell them they were making a mistake,” said one photographer. The four witnesses included three Americans, one working for the *New York Times*, and a Spanish photographer working for the New York-based *Newsday*.

The Pentagon flatly denied Taliban claims that two US helicopters had been shot down in the course of the weekend raid by Special Forces troops on targets in Kandahar, but admitted that one helicopter had crashed in Pakistan, killing two soldiers and wounding three. US officials called the crash accidental rather than due to enemy fire.

As for the second helicopter, the Arab television station Al-Jazeera showed film of wreckage found in the southern province of Helmand, near the border with Pakistan. The debris included tires and a chunk of metal stamped with the words “Boeing” and “Philadelphia, Pennsylvania,” the site of a major helicopter factory. One chunk of metal was described

by experts as the nosewheel of a Ch-47 Chinook helicopter.

The Special Forces raid involved more than 100 US Army Rangers and smaller numbers of Delta Force commandos who were dispatched to the residence of Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar with instructions to assassinate him. The *Washington Post* reported that President Bush has signed a National Security Directive authorizing the CIA to assassinate both Omar and Osama bin Laden, and authorizing the agency to spend an additional \$1 billion to carry out this task.

More and bigger raids are expected. More than 2,000 US troops are on the ground in Pakistan, according to press reports, deployed in three airbases near the Afghanistan border. They are using the airports of Jacobabad and Pasni as logistical bases and the airport of Dalbandin, nearest to the border, as a forward operational base.



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