

The killing fields of Afghanistan

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The first month of the war being prosecuted by the richest and most powerful military state on the planet has seen America unleash a terrible arsenal of destruction against one of the world's poorest countries. The full panoply of modern airborne munitions is being deployed against a land that has already been ravaged by war and civil war for over 20 years.

The US bombardment includes the use of fuel-air explosives (FAE), cluster bombs, bunker-busting bombs and carpet-bombing. The skies high above Afghanistan have been filled by the smoke trails of the B-52, the world's largest bomber, notorious for its missions over Vietnam and other parts of Indo-China more than 25 years ago.

According to the United Nations, one civilian was killed and another injured in Eshaq Zulaiman Zai village after touching a cluster bomb dropped from a B-52, and two children were seriously injured after picking up a bomb near the village of Qala Shaker.

Pakistani newspaper *The News* wrote October 26 that the UN "has sounded an alarm over the use of cluster bombs by American aircraft attacking Afghanistan, saying eight people died in a Herat village by dozens of unexploded orange coloured 'bomblets' littering roads and fields." A November 3 article in the *Toronto Globe & Mail* reports on the bombing of the village of Chowkar-Karez, where the Taliban say between 90 and 100 civilians, almost the entire population of the farming village, were killed by US warplanes on October 22. According to the article, "The Pentagon says the community was supporting terrorists from the al-Qaeda network and deserved its fate."

Another article in the *Dawn* from Pakistan reports the death of 40 people in an October 25 bombing raid on Kandahar, including the killing of 19 members of one family. The bombing also injured 35 people in Daman Borai village, 50 kilometres west of Kandahar. "'Where are my children, bring them,' moaned Siddiqua Bibi, a 70-year-old injured woman who lost all members of her family" the paper writes. She was the only surviving member of her family, which included two sons, a daughter-in-law and children.

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf is visiting London and Washington to ask for a halt in the bombing of Afghanistan during Ramadan, the holy month when Muslims fast between dawn and sunset. Speaking in London on November 8, Musharraf told Prime Minister Tony Blair, "It is perceived in the whole world as a war against the poor, miserable and innocent people of Afghanistan. Continuing during Ramadan will have negative fallout."

Musharraf's plea is not motivated so much by concern for innocent Afghans as for the stability of his own military regime.

The US-led war against the Taliban is deeply unpopular in Pakistan and has sparked continuous protests. On Friday, police shot dead three protesters in southwest Pakistan, during a day of strikes and blockades called by a coalition of Islamic groups and parties.

The request to halt the bombardment had been raised earlier by Musharraf, when he stopped over in Istanbul during his six-day diplomatic mission.

But his appeal was rejected. Although the bombing is being conducted exclusively by US aircraft, with British forces providing some logistical and refuelling support, Blair said the attacks "must continue until the objectives are secured."

The day before, answering prime minister's questions in the Commons, Blair defended the use of cluster bombs, saying they were "legal and are necessary in certain circumstances". UK Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon claimed the weapons were being used only against military targets and were "not being used against the civilian population."

During a November 6 Pentagon briefing, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said sorties by US warplanes had escalated to 120 a day. Already undoubtedly hundreds if not thousands of Taliban soldiers as well as civilians have been killed.

The most recent "weapon of mass destruction" deployed against Afghanistan is the so-called "Daisy Cutter" bomb. The 15,000-pound BLU-82 is the world's biggest conventional bomb. It is as large as a small car but much heavier, creating a 600-yard radius blast area in which virtually no living thing can survive.

The Daisy Cutter, named after the shape of the crater it leaves, is a fuel-air weapon, which exploits the devastating potential of almost any dust to explode in air. Before hitting the ground, the bomb releases a cloud of highly explosive ammonium nitrate, aluminium dust and polystyrene slurry into the air, which is then ignited, producing an intense fireball and a rapidly expanding blast wave many times greater than that from conventional explosives.

Dropped from MC-130 aircraft, the Daisy Cutter causes a firestorm that incinerates an area the size of five football fields, consumes oxygen, and creates a shock-wave and vacuum pressure that destroys the internal organs of anyone within range.

"As you would expect, they make a heck of a bang when they go off," General Peter Pace, vice-chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff told a press conference, "The intent is to kill people."

Human rights groups say fuel-air weapons are so indiscriminate that their use in populated areas would violate international norms of war.

Terrorism expert Mike Yardley said: "This is an awesome device. It immediately kills everything within range, and anyone

nearby will be left psychologically traumatised.

“The Taliban are difficult to get at in their network of shelters and tunnels and Daisy Cutters will be used as a means of destroying those. But with all the pictures of burnt babies that are already shown on Al-Jazeera TV on a daily basis, one wonders if this is going to be in our interests, because it is almost inevitable that innocent people will be caught up in one of these exploding.”

According to a 1993 study by the US Defence Intelligence Agency: “The [blast] kill mechanism against living targets is unique—and unpleasant.... What kills is the pressure wave, and more importantly, the subsequent rarefaction [vacuum], which ruptures the lungs. If the fuel deflagrates but does not detonate, victims will be severely burned and will probably also inhale the burning fuel.” (Defence Intelligence Agency, *Fuel-Air and Enhanced-Blast Explosive Technology—Foreign*, April 1993. Obtained by Human Rights Watch under the US Freedom of Information Act.)

A Central Intelligence Agency study found that “the effect of an FAE explosion within confined spaces is immense. Those near the ignition point are obliterated. Those at the fringe are likely to suffer many internal, and thus invisible injuries, including burst eardrums and crushed inner ear organs, severe concussions, ruptured lungs and internal organs, and possibly blindness.”

Because it has such effects one recent paper published by the Foreign Military Studies Office at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas says FAEs “can have the effect of a tactical nuclear weapon without residual radiation.”

Carpet-bombing

US planes involved in the carpet bombing are being deployed from carriers off the Pakistan coast or from the British territory of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean.

November 1, Rear Admiral John Stufflebeem, deputy director of operations for the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters that the B-52s were carpet-bombing targets “all over the country, including Taliban forces in the north.”

At a press briefing, Rumsfeld and Air Force General Richard Myers, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the United States had every right to use deadly cluster bombs, which rain dozens of explosive ‘bomblets’ onto a target, after the September 11 terror attacks. “They are being used on front-line Al-Qaeda and Taliban troops to try to kill them, it is why we’re using them, to be perfectly blunt,” Rumsfeld said.

The CBU-87/B “combined effects munition” is the standard air-delivered cluster bomb used by the US. It weighs 950 lbs (430 kgs) and contains 202 BLU-97/B bomblets. Dropped from 40,000 ft, it can unleash its deadly cargo on a target area about nine miles away, covering an area of up to eight football pitches. The explosive charge contained in each of the separate bomblets, which is scored to create up to 300 shrapnel pieces, is capable of piercing armour to a depth of about 7 inches (17cms), with a blast radius of as much as 250 feet (76 metres).

At least five percent do not explode on impact, lying on the ground where the bright yellow drinks can-sized bombs are frequently picked up by children, or those mistaking them for the similarly coloured food aid parcels.

“It is unfortunate that the cluster bombs, unexploded ones, are the same colour as the food packets,” said General Myers, who explained that leaflets in local languages have since been dropped over Afghanistan pointing out the differences between the Humanitarian Daily Ration packages and the bomblets.

“They were probably yellow because they were very visible and people could see them lying around, same for the cluster bombs, unfortunately—they get used to running to yellow,” Myers said, adding that the colour of the food aid would be changed to blue, but this would take “some time”.

Washington’s arsenal also includes the use of the 5,000lb GBU-28 “Deep Throat” bunker-buster, which burrows down through as much as 20ft of rock before exploding inside the cave. Its “smart” fuse can tell the difference between rock, concrete, earth and air.

During World War II, 70 percent of bombs were aimed at individual targets—usually military or key industrial facilities—while 30 percent were dropped in “areas,” territory in which distinctions between civilians and military were meaningless. In Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, where “carpet-bombing” and “saturation bombing” predominated, 80 percent of bombs fell on “areas”, and not on individual targets. Washington is now returning to the same tactics in using B-52s over Afghanistan.

The war in Vietnam (1961-75) killed one million Vietnamese combatants, according to some estimates, with 20,000 civilians being systematically assassinated in the CIA’s Operation Phoenix Program. During the bombing of Cambodia (1969-73), the US dropped the equivalent of three times the bomb tonnage used against Japan in World War II, killing hundreds of thousands of people, and creating over a million refugees.

American involvement in Latin America saw 200,000 killed in the war against Nicaragua (1982-91) and 5,000 were killed in the 1990 invasion of Panama. The Health Education Trust estimates that 200,000 Iraqis died during the Gulf War and its immediate aftermath. The US-imposed sanctions against Iraq have since caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands more, including many children. To these figures can be added many more who died in Washington’s covert operations carried out in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Kampuchea, Angola, Mozambique, Iran, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, etc.



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