

Afghanistan: US rules out surrender and turns Tora Bora into a killing field

Peter Symonds
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The US military is continuing its relentless bombing of the Tora Bora area of Afghanistan after sabotaging a surrender deal negotiated last week between Afghani militia leaders and pro-Taliban fighters holed up in cave complexes in the rugged mountains. Claiming that it now has Osama bin Laden and other senior Al Qaeda figures cornered, the US is conducting what amounts to a systematic slaughter.

Under pressure from Washington, thousands of Pakistani troops backed by armed helicopters have shut the Afghanistan border to prevent any escape. On the ground, around 300 US and British special forces units are operating alongside three militia groups to hunt down Al Qaeda members. In the air, the US has concentrated its massive firepower on the Tora Bora area, using sophisticated bunker-busting bombs to seal or destroy caves and annihilate any opposition.

The latest reports indicate that the US-backed militias have taken many of the cave complexes in the area and hundreds of pro-Taliban troops are on the run. One militia commander said there were many bodies, and “they are in pieces from the bombing”. According to the *BBC*, another local militia leader, Hazrat Ali, claimed his troops had killed 200 Al Qaeda fighters and captured 35.

Last week Ali and other militia commanders had attempted to negotiate a surrender to end the weeks of US aerial bombardment that has already claimed the lives of dozens of local villagers and led thousands more to flee the area. On December 12, however, as a deal appeared to be imminent, US military advisers intervened to block the arrangement and pressure their Afghan allies to continue the attack. Ali commented bitterly: “The Americans won’t accept their surrender. They want to kill them.”

The militia leaders were in no position to argue.

Comprising poorly armed and equipped peasants, these groups are led by local warlords who are motivated in large part by the huge \$25 million reward that the Washington has placed on bin Laden’s head. The fighters themselves are little more than cannon fodder in the US operation. A number have died in misdirected air strikes.

The *International Herald Tribune* reported that, according to one of those present, there were several bargaining sessions, each lasting about half an hour or so, and the lead US negotiator was a middle-aged man in civilian clothes. “The Americans were strongly pressuring us. In the end, the commanders agreed, but reluctantly, to press the attack on Qaeda,” the unidentified Afghan participant in the talks told the *Herald*.

The surrender deadline on December 12 passed, as did a reset deadline for the following day—at least in part because the US refused to halt its bombing campaign. Pentagon spokeswoman Victoria Clarke stated: “The [bombing] activity is still going on. There wasn’t a pause, there isn’t a pause. As we get targets of opportunity we will pursue them.”

Militia field commander Amin Jan angrily explained that bloodshed could have been avoided. “They [Al Qaeda fighters] were happy to surrender. They made fires at night and had assurances they could go freely, but when the bombs started they became confused... [Now] it is impossible to surrender to us.”

Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld baldly denied that the US opposed the surrender. “Of course, I want them to surrender and be captured and interrogated so that we could also know their organisation and plans in other countries,” he said. But he also made clear that there would be no negotiations and that any surrender would be unconditional and to US forces.

The pro-Taliban fighters, particularly non-Afghanis, were justifiably fearful of their fate if they surrendered to US forces or pro-US militia. Hundreds of foreign Taliban POWs were massacred at Mazar-e-Sharif following an alleged uprising at the Qali-i-Janghi fortress last month. Foreign fighters at Tora Bora said they would only surrender to the UN in the presence of diplomats from their country of origin.

The US has repeatedly insisted on taking control of any captured or surrendering Al Qaeda leaders and troops. But the size of the prison camp being built by US marines underscores the preference of the Bush administration—estimates put the number of Al Qaeda troops in the Tora Bora region as high as 2,000, whereas the US detention centre will hold a maximum of 300.

The character of the US Special Forces units at Tora Bora also indicates that Washington is intent on killing most of the Al Qaeda fighters. As well as teams identifying targets for air strikes, specialist “snatch” teams, trained to either kill or capture particular individuals, and snipers armed with high-powered rifles have been dispatched to the area.

The US airforce is using Tora Bora as proving ground for its newest types of ordinance, particularly so-called bunker-busting bombs designed to attack heavily fortified positions. A new cruise missile—the AGM-86D—is designed to sense its surroundings and detonate at a pre-determined depth, doubling the penetrating ability of earlier weapons. The US military is also utilising the Israeli-made AGM 142, which is guided by remote control into the mouths of caves.

Up until December 12, the US airforce had dropped an estimated 1.8 million kg of explosives on the Tora Bora area—three times the amount used to bomb the German city of Dresden in 1945. Since then the bombing has intensified using B-52s, B-1s and carrier-based jets. Several massive fuel bombs—7.5 tonne Daisy Cutters—have also been dropped. AC-130 gunships have been deployed to strafe troops caught out in the open.

Rumsfeld, who has been touring Central Asia—making a brief stopover in Afghanistan—bragged to accompanying journalists that 400 bombs had been dropped on Tora Bora in just two days. “It’s been very heavy, and it’s obviously working,” he enthused. Having penned in the pro-Taliban troops and vetoed a

surrender, Rumsfeld and the military top brass are carrying out a one-sided massacre, not a military campaign.



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