

# As US bombs more civilian targets, Bush insists Afghan war must go on

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Speaking with reporters on Friday, George W. Bush defended the US war in Afghanistan, making the case for an open-ended military campaign in the Central Asian country and giving no timetable for a withdrawal.

Bush's remarks came the day after a US air raid killed at least 40 people in the eastern Afghan province of Paktika, according to the Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press (AIP). Spokesmen for the new Afghan interim government called on the US to halt the bombing campaign.

Mohammad Habel, from the Afghan Defense Ministry, said that Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda fighters had most likely fled to Pakistan and that further US bombing was pointless. Habel told Reuters that the remaining al Qaeda forces are few in number "and may be annihilated in a maximum of three days. Once this is done there is no need for continuation of the bombing. We demand America stop its bombing of Afghanistan after this goal is achieved."

However Bush, appearing with US General Tommy Franks at the president's ranch in Crawford, Texas, made it clear the US has no intention of pulling out of Afghanistan or stopping the air raids. "The American people just must understand when I said that we need to be patient, that I meant it," Bush said, "and we're going to be there for a while. And I don't know the exact moment when we [will] leave ... but it's not until this mission is complete."

General Franks added: "This is Afghanistan and we have pockets of Taliban still in that country. And that's one of the reasons that we're going to stay there until we have mopped all that up." Setting the US goal as the elimination of the Taliban, or anyone who ever associated with it, has remarkable implications in a country where thousands of people—including leading

members of the present interim government—have links to the organization. The general is essentially holding out the option that US forces remain in Afghanistan indefinitely.

Bush's 15-minute "Press Availability" seemed to have been called for the express purpose of underscoring that his administration has no intention of winding up its campaign in Afghanistan or its international "war on terrorism." Government officials want to counter any sentiments—in the American population or among its nominal allies internationally—that the stated aim of the US mission has been accomplished and that further military attacks are unnecessary.

In fact, Bush made it clear that US military commanders have been given a green light to pursue the Afghan campaign indefinitely: "We won't be making political decisions about what to do with our military ... and when Tommy [General Franks] says 'Mission complete, Mr. President,' that's when we start moving troops out." With this statement, Bush makes an astonishing abdication of civilian power over the armed forces, and indicates that democratic controls over the military are being subordinated to the aims of the generals, who in essence are calling the shots in the Afghan campaign.

Bush's statements come amid mounting concerns internationally over Afghan civilian deaths from US bombing raids. A recent independent study by Marc Herold, an economics professor at the University of New Hampshire, estimates that at least 3,767 civilians have died in the bombings. This tally is extremely conservative, as it does not include deaths from bomb-related injuries, hunger or displacement caused by the air raids. Unaccounted for as well are thousands of Taliban soldiers—many of them poor, young

recruits—who died in captivity as POWs, were killed in combat or were annihilated in the US bombing raids.

On Friday, the Pentagon declined to rule out fresh air strikes despite the request from the new Afghan interim government. Chief Defense Department spokesperson Victoria Clarke commented: “We will do what it takes to achieve what it is we’re trying to achieve.” She said the US goal remained “rooting out” bin Laden and his al Qaeda network.

In the latest air bombardment last Thursday, US B-52 bombers and an AC-130 gunship struck southwest of Kabul, near the town of Ghazni. US military commanders claimed to have “very good indications” they were targeting a compound the Pentagon believes was used by senior figures in the former Taliban regime. General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, confirmed: “We did strike one target with both heavy bombers and tactical aircraft, using both precision and non-precision weapons.”

However, numerous independent press reports indicate it was impoverished Afghan civilians who died in the air strike. Witnesses from Naka village, one of those hit, said that the attack took place while residents slept. A source in the Waziristan tribal agency on the border with Paktika province said that 40 people were killed, up to 60 were wounded and 25 houses were destroyed in the raid. AIP put the death toll at 25, and quoted witnesses as saying the bombing was so severe it was difficult to identify some of the dead.

Survivors told reporters they did not understand why they had been bombed, and that no al Qaeda members were in the area. “Neither Osama nor any other foreigner is in our village,” one villager said. AIP reported that the home of Taliban commander Maulvi Taha had been hit, but that he was not in the house at the time.

US reconnaissance planes continue to fly over the White Mountains near the eastern border with Pakistan and the US has given no indication the air strikes will stop. Military spokespersons callously dismiss reports of civilian casualties. General Myers commented on the Ghazni raids: “We think the majority of folks in there would have been Taliban leadership.”

A week earlier, on December 20, a convoy of about 100 people on route to the inauguration of Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan’s interim leader, came under attack in Paktia province in eastern Afghanistan.

Witnesses and survivors reported the strikes lasted about seven hours and about 65 people died in the attack. The US continues to insist that it hit a Taliban convoy after it fired on US warplanes with shoulder-launched missiles.

The village of Asmani Kilai, which rests on barren hills in the Ozi district of Paktia province, was hit in the attack. Villagers’ modest homes were reduced to rubble. Reuters reported that six cars in the convoy were destroyed, and shrapnel and the remains of spent ordnance littered the ground. Survivor Haji Yaqub Khan Tanaiwal, 65, reported from his hospital bed in Pakistan: “The bombing was so intense that only the lucky ones could escape.”

Since the US launched the war on Afghanistan October 7, more than 12,000 US bombs have been dropped on the country. According to the Pentagon, about 60 percent of these bombs have been precision-guided by satellite or laser technology. However, many of these bombs—dropped by B-52s and other aircraft from tens of thousands of feet in the air—have strayed off course, hitting civilian targets.

New reports on damage in Kandahar, the last stronghold of the Taliban, reveal the destruction rained down on the city by the US air campaign. American bombs hit the city center, villas in the city’s upscale outskirts as well as mud-brick houses in slum areas. The war on Kandahar was waged almost exclusively from the sky, and US and anti-Taliban soldiers only entered the city earlier this month after the Taliban and al Qaeda fled.

US air raids in Kandahar destroyed residents’ homes with no connection to the Taliban, and demolished vacant buildings. The *New York Times* reported that included among the civilian casualties were shopkeepers, tailors, car battery repairmen and other small businesspeople, as well as residents of the city’s destitute slums.



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