

Report estimates Afghan deaths exceed Twin Towers figure

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The US bombardment of Afghanistan has killed at least 3,767 civilians, according to the first independent study made into civilian casualties in the war-torn country.

Marc Herold, an economics professor at the University of New Hampshire, arrived at his estimate by cross-referencing reports in the international media. His findings, “Who Will Count the Dead?—US media fail to report civilian casualties in Afghanistan” (<http://www.media-alliance.org/mediafile/20-5/index.html>) contain detailed graphs, along with statements on each instance by the US military, the Taliban regime and news sources.

On this basis, Herold estimates that US bombs have already killed more Afghani civilians than the estimated 3,234 people who died in the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

His tally does not include those who have subsequently died of bomb-related injuries; hunger or displacement caused by the bombing. Nor does it include military deaths, such as the massacre of up to 800 prisoners slaughtered in Mazar-i-Sharif and more recent casualties from the US carpet-bombing of the Tora Bora mountain range.

Herold complains that rather than attempting to uncover the truth about each incident, the US media and other Western journalists have simply parroted the line of the Bush administration and its constant recourse to the statement that “the claims [of deaths] could not be independently verified”. As an example, Herold cites the article “Truth and Lies About Taliban Death Claims”, published in Britain’s *Sunday Telegraph* November 4 2001. The authors Macer Hall and David Wastell “solemnly declare that ‘far fewer Afghan civilians have been killed by American bombs than is claimed by Taliban propaganda,’” Herold

reports. But the evidence on which they base this assertion is a Western “intelligence report obtained by the *Sunday Telegraph*.” The article then presents “a list of Taliban claims and counter it with ‘the Truth,’ as per the intelligence report, NOT their own independent research!” Herold notes.

It is possible to verify such accounts, and arrive at an independent estimate, Herold insists. Drawing on reports from Indian and Pakistani daily newspapers, the *Singapore News*, British, Canadian, and Australian papers, the *Afghan Islamic Press* (AIP) based in Peshawar, *Agence France Press* (AFP), *Pakistan News Service* (PNS), *Reuters*, *BBC News Online*, and satellite TV station *al-Jazeera*, as well as other reputable sources, Herold examines five bombing incidents during October 2001. He contrasts these reports with the *Telegraph*’s accounts of Taliban “claims” and the “truth” issued by the US administration, before arriving at his own estimate of a civilian death toll of at least 239 people in these five incidents alone.

October 11 — The Taliban reported that the US had bombed Karam village, killing 200 people. The Pentagon responded that it had hit a military base on a hillside and, whilst some civilians may have been killed, Taliban figures were “exaggerated”. Reports by at least seven internationally respected news sources, however, stated that two US jets had bombed the village, comprising just 60 mud houses, killing 100-160 civilians.

October 13 — The Taliban reported that a US missile had struck civilian homes in Kabul, killing an unspecified number of civilians. The Pentagon acknowledged that a missile had gone astray in a heavily populated area. News sources verified that a US F-18 jet had dropped a 2,000-lb payload upon the impoverished Qila Meer Abas neighbourhood, killing

four civilians.

October 21 — The Taliban reported that US planes had bombed Herat hospital, killing more than 100 civilians. The Pentagon again admitted that it had missed its target—a military barracks—but said the hospital was a “considerable distance” from where the bomb had struck, which was unlikely to have caused civilian deaths. News sources reported an F-18 had dropped a 1,000lb cluster bomb onto a 200-bed military hospital and mosque. The number of casualties was unspecified, but Herold estimates them at 30.

Herold was unable to confirm the claim, attributed to the Taliban by the *Telegraph*, that on October 29 the US had struck a mosque in Kandahar, killing civilians. He was able to find a Pentagon denial of air strikes in the general vicinity. However, international news sources reported an October 24 pre-dawn bombing raid, involving 8-9 cluster bombs, in which a mosque in the village of Ishaq Sulaiman, near Herat, was struck killing 20 civilians.

October 31 — The Taliban reported that a Red Crescent clinic in Kandahar had been hit, killing 11 people, which the Pentagon denied. Again, news sources, which also provided accompanying photographs, reported a pre-dawn raid, during which an F-18 had dropped a 2,000lb bomb on the clinic, killing 15-25 people and reducing the facility to rubble.

“To make the war on Afghanistan appear ‘just’, it becomes imperative to completely block access to information on the true human costs,” writes Herold.

“The actions of Bush-Rumsfeld-Rice speak eloquently to this effort: For example, calling in all the major US news networks to give them their marching orders, buying up all commercial satellite imagery available to the general public, sending [Secretary of State Colin] Powell to Qatar to persuade the independent *al-Jazeera* news network, and, when that fails, targeting the Kabul office of *al-Jazeera* for a direct missile hit. For the most part, the major US corporate media appear to have obeyed the Pentagon directives and given sparse coverage to the topic of civilian casualties.”

Herold shows that the high number of civilian casualties is not simply the result of mistakes, but is the outcome of US military policy. He records a number of instances in which US jets have bombarded villages and mud huts, including the flattening of an entire

residential area in Uruzgan on October 19, when at least 30 people were killed. He documents the October 25 bombing of a “fully loaded city bus at Kabul Gate, in Kandahar, incinerating 10-20 passengers” and the flattening of the “mountain village of Gluco—located on the Khyber Pass and far away from any military facility—killing seven villagers”. He also cites reports of a “bombed-out, twisted, and still smoking remains of a 15-lorry fuel convoy just north of Kandahar during the week of November 29”, which left the charred remains of at least 15 civilians on the road.

In addition, Herold lists the deliberate targeting of civilian facilities, including Kabul’s main telephone exchange and power station, the electricity grid in Kandahar, seven air strikes against Afghanistan’s largest hydroelectric power station northwest of Kandahar, and the November 12 strike on the Kabul office of the *al-Jazeera* news station. On November 18, US planes bombed *madrasas* (religious schools) in the Khost and Shamshad areas.

“Utilities, news organisations, educational institutions—all seem to be ‘fair’ targets in this war”, writes Herold. He attributes the disregard for Afghan lives to racism. When the “‘enemy’ is non-white, the scale of violence used by the US government to achieve its stated objectives at minimum costs knows no limits”. However, this is far too simplistic an explanation. Herold’s own account of the deliberate targeting of civilian areas underscores the venal imperialist character of the US-led attack. The latest explosion of US militarist aggression is aimed at terrorising the Afghan population into submitting to a colonial-style take-over of their homeland, as well as sending out a warning to other countries that they could meet the same fate if they fail to toe Washington’s line.



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