

US air strikes kill hundreds of Afghan civilians

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US bombing raids continue to pound Kandahar, as tribal and other opposition forces move towards the last stronghold of Taliban fighters in the southern Afghan city. The US has nearly doubled the number of combat helicopters at a desert airstrip southwest of the city, and has sharply increased its fire power.

Anti-Taliban Afghan commanders and local residents report that hundreds of civilians have been killed by US air strikes in the area. Witnesses reported that as many as 300 civilians were killed when US bombs hit three villages near Kandahar controlled by opposition forces.

US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld commented on the Kandahar campaign that “the remaining task is a particularly dirty and unpleasant one,” and warned that the battle for the city could be bloody. One thousand US Marines are within striking distance of the city, and continue to fly in more light armored vehicles for search-and-destroy missions hunting Taliban leaders and soldiers, Osama bin Laden and alleged Al Qaeda members.

The United Nations estimates that 2,000 refugees are leaving Kandahar province each day, and that 8,000 Afghans have reached neighboring Pakistan since the fighting intensified last week. Others have fled north to the capital city of Kabul. Refugees reported chaos in Kandahar as thousands sought to flee, fearing a bloodbath. Two key bridges have reportedly been destroyed, leaving just one route out of the city.

Over the weekend, the mountain area of northeast Afghanistan near Jalalabad was pounded by air raids and witnesses said at least four villages were hit. Afghan officials reported that more than 80 villagers and opposition soldiers were killed and nearly 200 civilians injured. Surviving residents put the death toll higher, saying more than 200 bodies of civilians lay dead in the rubble following the US bombing raids.

Caravans traveled slowly down rickety roads from the mountains, carrying the dead and wounded.

US Central Command spokesmen claimed that the recent air strikes targeted only Tora Bora, the mountain camp 28 miles south of Jalalabad where US intelligence officials believe Osama bin Laden is hiding. US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said he would not rule out ordering gas to be pumped into the Tora Bora caves to rout bin Laden.

Afghan officials suggested that the US was using outmoded maps and faulty intelligence, and is indiscriminately hitting impoverished civilians in the area. A Pentagon spokesman denied on Saturday that the bombings of civilian villages had taken place, but a Central Command spokesman commented on Sunday, “We’re aware of those reports and we’re looking into it.”

Rear Adm. Craig R. Quigley said that US targets did include concrete buildings constructed in recent years around cave and tunnel entrances where Taliban forces are believed to be hiding. He commented callously, “If there are any Al Qaeda or Taliban fighters that have chosen to bring their family members or other innocent civilians into those complexes with them, we think that’s terrible, and they are putting their lives at risk.”

Haji Muhammad Zaman, military commander in Jalalabad for the Eastern Shura—an Islamic council that took power from the Taliban last week—said eight of his fighters, including two teenage boys, were killed in their sleep when US bombs destroyed a district office building early Sunday morning in Landakhel, about 25 miles southwest of Jalalabad. Zaman took foreign reporters into a Jalalabad hospital to view the dead men’s corpses, commenting, “[The Pentagon] just says, ‘Sorry.’ But it’s a crime against humanity.”

Following Sunday’s attack, villagers from Landakehl

came to the bombed office to search for victims and survivors, and about 10 minutes later another bomb struck. Majnoon, a 35-year-old farmer, said he was removing debris from atop victims at the scene when the second bomb hit. “I don’t know why they bombed us,” he said, “We are not sinful people. These are children, and these are villagers.” He suffered lacerations to his head, chest, hands, arms and legs.

On nearby peaks in an area known as Kama Ado witnesses reported that more than 100 villagers were killed in bombing raids. Another 50 civilians deaths were reported in the villages of Balut and Akal Khan. Destitute area residents live in homes constructed of mud, sticks and stones and the villages are only accessible by mountain dirt roads and foot paths.

The bombs first struck before sunrise, when villagers were taking their early morning meal before the beginning of the Ramadan fast. Many of the homes in Kama Ado were sunk into big craters in the earth and others were split open. Remnants of the villagers’ lives were strewn about—children’s clothing, kitchen items, the bodies of cows killed in the air strike.

Pentagon spokesmen continued to insist that the attack on Kama Ado “just didn’t happen.” But reporters visiting the village reported seeing 40 freshly dug, unmarked graves and the destruction left by the weekend’s raid by American B-52s, which dropped dozens of bombs on the village.

Beginning in mid-November, US bombs also rained down relentlessly on Khanabad in northern Afghanistan, one of the last Taliban strongholds. Witnesses reported over 100 unarmed civilians killed in bombing raids on heavily populated residential areas of the city. The *Independent* newspaper reported that entire suburbs of Khanabad, such as Charikari, were destroyed, with only giant holes and rubble remaining where homes once stood.

Survivor Juma Khan told reporters that 15 members of his family—including his wife and six of his children and his brother and all his children—were killed when a bomb hit their house. His daughter Gulshan, the only other surviving family member, suffered severe head injuries. “Whoever bombed me is my enemy,” Mr. Khan said.

Unexploded cluster bombs—harmless-looking yellow tubes lying in fields and roads around the town—pose a persistent danger to residents. The *Independent* came

across two returning refugees to Khanabad who fell victim to the unexploded bombs: Habibullah, 15, whose stomach was torn open, and Nur Mohammed, an elderly man writhing in pain. Both were taken to the area hospital, where only one doctor was on duty.

While some refugees fleeing Khanabad reportedly said that Taliban forces might be hiding in homes there, remaining residents denied this claim. Residential areas had been pummeled by US bombs, but a Taliban barracks nearby stood unharmed.



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