

Open-ended US bombing campaign results in further Afghan casualties

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Amid a rising toll of civilian casualties, pressure is mounting on the newly-installed interim Afghan administration, led by chairman Hamid Karzai, to call for an end to US bombing.

In the latest incident last weekend, more than 100 people, including women and children, are reported to have died in an attack on the village of Qalaye Niazi in Paktia province, just north of the provincial capital of Gardez. The US insisted that the attack was targetted against a compound housing members of the former Taliban regime and Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network.

But angry locals have dismissed the US claims. Haji Saifullah, head of the area's tribal council, told the *Reuters* news agency that the raid had killed 107 people, all of whom were civilians and not members of the Taliban or Al Qaeda. "The attacks must end. The Americans should stop bombing," he said. A *Reuters* cameraman verified seeing huge bomb craters in the stricken village and scraps of flesh, pools of blood and clumps of what appeared to be human hair in the rubble.

Janat Gul, a villager, told the press that 24 members of his family had been killed. Describing the raid as a terrible mistake, he said: "There are no Al Qaeda or Taliban people here. People are very upset about what is going on." At the village cemetery, residents pointed out a fresh grave where 50 of the victims had been buried. They said that the remainder of those killed belonged to semi-nomadic families and their bodies had been returned to the mountainous region of Khost.

An on-the-spot report by international aid workers cited in the *New York Times* stated that the Taliban may have stashed weapons in the area after fleeing Kabul in November. But they had since moved on, leaving behind only unusable weaponry. The air raids, carried out around 3am, lasted for two hours and flattened five compounds. Villagers reported that after the first raid, some survivors including women and children attempted to flee but were tracked down by helicopter gunships and killed.

"The villagers, mostly the relatives of the victims and a number of other people from the neighbourhood were removing the rubble, using spades and tractors, to pull out the dead bodies," the report stated. It noted that so far locals had found the remains of "17 men, 10 women and 25 children."

Initially, the US military flatly denied any civilian deaths. A

spokesman Commander Matthew Klee confirmed that two B-1B bombers and a B-52 had struck "a known Taliban and Al Qaeda leadership compound" not a village with precision guided munitions. "All the bombs struck the intended target. We struck what we targetted and nothing else," he said.

Klee claimed that surface-to-air missiles had been fired in the direction of the bombers and that secondary explosions had been observed indicating the presence of munitions or a fuel dump. But neither he nor other US spokesmen have offered any evidence to substantiate their claims. The US military had not visited the site and thus had no means of verifying who had been killed by the bombs.

Another spokesman Major Bill Harrison tried a different tack. "It would be certainly a tragedy," he said, if the reports of civilian deaths were true. But if innocent civilians were dead, Harrison added, "it would be the direct cause of them [the Taliban] putting people at risk by living alongside civilians." The stock-standard "civilian shield" line offers a blanket exoneration for the US military without providing any explanation as to how or why the target was selected or whether any consideration at all was given to likely civilian casualties.

The air strike on Qalaye Niazi is the third incident in Paktia province in which substantial civilian casualties have been reported. On December 27, at least 40 people were killed in the village of Naka when it was attacked by US B-52 bombers and an AC-130 gunship. Just a week before, a convoy of about 100 people was attacked near the village of Asmani Kilai, killing over 60 people. In both cases, locals strongly denied the presence of senior Taliban or Al Qaeda figures.

At a press conference last week, Abdul Hakim Munib said that the Paktia tribal council, which he heads, "urges the interim administration of Afghanistan and the world alliance against terrorism to stop bombarding... Paktia." He said that 15 of those killed in the convoy were tribal leaders from the Khost region of Paktia who were en route to Kabul to witness the inauguration of the new regime. "These were all white-bearded tribal elders who wanted to congratulate Karzai and were mistakenly bombed," he said.

Last Friday Defence Minister General Mohammad Fahim said there was no point in continuing the bombing as Al Qaeda and Taliban forces were on the verge of being eliminated and

bin Laden had probably fled the country. A Defence Ministry spokesman Mohammad Habel was even more direct in issuing a demand for the bombing to stop.

Washington, however, has emphatically rejected any limitation on its military operations in Afghanistan. As the US commander General Tommy Franks commented from President Bush's ranch: "We will not be pressed into doing something that does not represent our national objectives, and we will take as long as it takes." He said that he expected US forces to remain in Afghanistan "for quite a long period of time".

Pressure is mounting on Karzai, who has close ties to the US, to call on Washington to halt its campaign. Last week he met with one of the survivors of the bombed convoy. According to Paktia tribal leader Munib, Karzai gave an undertaking that he would press for an end to the US bombardment. But in an interview with the *New York Times* on Tuesday, the Afghan head endorsed the ongoing US military operations. "We want to finish the terrorists in Afghanistan—we want to finish them completely," he said, adding the worthless proviso, "But we must make sure our civilians do not suffer."

Just who are the targets of the US military is completely unclear. Different accounts have emerged of the December 20 bombing of the convoy that vary according to local loyalties and rivalries. When he described the US attack as a mistake, Paktia leader Munib was quite candid about his links to the Taliban. "I myself was a deputy minister for communications, border and transport under the Taliban regime. They were with the Taliban. I was with the Taliban. All the people you are seeing here were with the Taliban."

Munib's involvement with the Taliban was not unusual. After years of internal conflict, there was considerable sympathy, though not necessarily active support, for the Taliban regime among the Pashtun tribes of the area. Moreover, the rapid expansion of the Taliban after its formation in 1994 was in part due to large bribes paid to local tribal leaders and militia commanders, who then became "Taliban officials" in their areas. Now Munib and his supporters have seen which way the political wind is blowing and have changed their allegiances accordingly, as tribal leaders have often done in the past.

As an article in the *New York Times* noted: "The convoy that came under American attack may have contained some former Taliban members, but it was clearly welcome in Kabul. When it was rerouted along the way by what some here called a rival tribal faction onto a dangerous back road, members of the convoy tried to reach Mr Karzai for assurances they would not be bombed, Mr Munib said. They also used their satellite phones to call American officials, he said, although he did not know which officials."

Munib and others accuse a rival tribal leader Pacha Khan Zadran of instigating the attack by informing US officials that the convoy contained Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders. His brother Ammanulah was one of the handpicked delegates to the

UN-sponsored conference on Afghanistan in Bonn and is now the minister for borders and tribes in the new government. Pacha Khan is seeking to consolidate his local control by gaining the post of governor of Paktia, Paktika and Khost.

Pacha Khan denies having fed information to the US military, but is quite open in the denunciation of his rivals. The opposition, he said, were Al Qaeda supporters, adding that the leader of the tribal council was the "No 1 Al Qaeda supporter". "They are with Al Qaeda people in Gardez. They are Arabs and Chechens." As far as he was concerned, "America has not made any mistake in its bombing." Clearly the Zadran brothers have worked out that the surest way of dealing with their enemies in post-Taliban Afghanistan is to denounce them as "Al Qaeda people" and let the US military do the rest.

The US continued last week to baldly deny making any mistake in bombing the convoy. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Richard Myers stated on December 28: "We have nothing to indicate anything other than what we said before, and that that convoy was, again, leadership that was involved in this war on terrorism." As well as exhibiting a callous disregard for human life, Myers's statement raises a more fundamental issue.

Just who are the "terrorists" in a region where loyalties are notoriously changeable and the subject of financial inducement? Is every Pashtun leader and tribal chief who ever supported the Taliban or held a minor post in their administration to be held responsible for the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington? If that were the case then the US-backed Karzai could just as well be branded a terrorist for providing the Taliban with money and arms in the early years of its rule.

The very looseness with which the term "terrorist" is applied underscores its political purpose—to provide the pretext for the unrestricted operation of the US military in a campaign which bears less and less relationship to even its own stated aim of "rooting out" the Al Qaeda and Taliban leadership. Even if bin Laden and Taliban leader Mullah Omar are caught or killed, Washington can continue to use second or third rank Taliban officials as the excuse for a continuing military operation that is bound up with other objectives: US strategic and economic aims in Central Asia and the Bush administration's political needs at home.

Those who continue to bear the brunt of the US "war on terrorism" are the scores of Afghans who are killed, maimed or driven from their homes.



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