

US warplanes massacre villagers in central Afghanistan

Peter Symonds
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The bombing of the village of Kararak in central Afghanistan in the early hours of Monday morning adds another tragic chapter to the long list of criminal acts carried out by the US military since its invasion of the country last October.

Full details are not yet available and estimates vary as to the number of civilian casualties. The lowest, provided by an Afghan Defence Ministry official Dr Gulbuddin, puts the death toll of men, women and children at 30. Bismullah, a spokesman for Uruzgan province where the village is located, stated that there were around 40 dead and 70 injured. Other sources put the number of dead and injured at over 300.

According to Afghan officials, US warplanes attacked a wedding celebration in the village, mistaking the traditional exuberant firing of shots into the air as a hostile attack. Abdul Saboor, a resident, told the BBC: "We managed to transfer some of the wounded to Kandahar in the morning. Some of the foreigners' choppers also came to help. There are no Taliban or Al Qaeda or Arabs here. These people were all civilians, women and children."

Reports from hospitals in the Afghan city of Kandahar, about 160 km south west of the village, gave a clearer picture of the extent of the disaster. A number of children were among the injured, including Paliko, a six-year-old girl, who was still in her party dress. Villagers said all of her family were dead. Another injured child, Malika, 7, lost both her parents as well as a brother and sister.

Hospital officials said that most of the dead and injured were women and children. One nurse Mohammed Nadir told the press: "We have many children who are injured and who have no family ... Everyone says that their parents are dead."

The response of US military spokesmen have followed a chillingly familiar pattern—a grudging admission of civilian casualties along with blunt denials of any

responsibility. No coherent explanation has been provided. If past incidents are any guide, the scant details will quickly turn out to be a mixture of self-serving lies and half-truths.

A brief statement from US Central Command in Tampa, Florida claimed, without providing any evidence, that US warplanes had hit legitimate targets. "Close air support from US Air Force B-52 and AC-130 aircraft struck several ground targets, including anti-aircraft artillery sites that were engaging the aircraft," it said. No information was provided as to the number of bombs and missiles dropped, the nature of the other targets or how and why so many civilians happened to be killed in an attack on an anti-aircraft battery.

A Pentagon spokesman, Navy Lieutenant Jeff Davis, offered a somewhat different spin. During the attack on anti-aircraft guns, he admitted: "At least one bomb was errant. We don't know where it fell. We are aware of reports of civilian casualties but don't know if casualties were caused by the bomb." The account is completely at variance with the stories of survivors in Kandahar who spoke of a sustained attack that lasted for about two hours rather than a single "errant bomb".

US Army Colonel Roger King, speaking at Bagram air base north of Kabul, repeated the line that a coalition reconnaissance operation had come under anti-aircraft fire. "We understand," he conceded, "there were some civilian casualties during the operation." He offered the "deepest sympathies" of the US government to the families of the dead and injured, then added: "Coalition military forces take extraordinary measures to protect against civilian casualties."

King did not provide, even in outline, what these "extraordinary measures" were. Previously US spokesmen have indicated that the military employs a battery of hi-tech electronic, visual and infra-red surveillance equipment attached to satellites, aircraft and

un-manned drones. Such information requires interpretation, however. No one has ever explained how the data can be used to distinguish friend from foe in the backward tribal areas of rural Afghanistan where loyalties are shifting and uncertain.

By all accounts, the attack took place in the middle of the night—around 1 or 2 am. King did not bother to explain why a reconnaissance operation was underway at such an hour or how the “extraordinary measures” could prevent the likelihood of errors inherent in night operations. The truth is that the US military command has simply assumed the right by force of arms to roam the country day and night and attack at will regardless of the consequences.

Although it should not be ruled out altogether, it is unlikely that the attack on the village of Kararak was intentional. The more likely scenario is that the AC-130, a slow-flying, heavily armoured aircraft armed with anti-tank weapons, and the B-52 were called in to strike at targets about which there was little or no information. The decision reveals a reckless indifference for civilian life, which would, if taken to a court of law, be grounds for manslaughter at the very least.

Far from the Pentagon exercising extreme caution, US military operations, large and small, particularly in the Pashtun tribal areas in the south and east of Afghanistan, appear to treat the entire populace as a potential enemy. The US bombing raids and special forces operations continue in the region even though no great “successes” have been announced for months. The aim of the US military and their paid Afghan allies is not so much to capture “Al Qaeda and Taliban” but to harass and intimidate an increasingly hostile civilian population.

The lack of information about the events in Kararak is not because no US forces have been to the village. King told the media that US helicopters had evacuated four of the injured. Offering assistance was not, however, the main reason for the presence of US military. An elderly villager, Abdul Qayyam, explained that American soldiers arrived in the area demanding to know “who fired on the helicopters?” “I said ‘I don’t know’ and one of the soldiers wanted to tie my hands. But someone said he is an old man and out of respect they didn’t,” he said.

Such is the Pentagon’s contempt for civilians that the majority of incidents reported in the media are not even investigated. No official tally is kept of the number of civilian casualties. In the case of the attack on Kararak, the US military has announced an official inquiry and the dispatch of a team to the area. No confidence can be

placed in this investigation, however.

One of the few previous inquiries concerned a special forces raid on January 24 on the village of Hazar Qadam, also in Uruzgan province which resulted in 15 deaths and the detention, interrogation and torture of another 27 men. All the survivors were released after it was found that they were connected to allies of the US-backed administration of Hamid Karzai. US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld announced an investigation, which promptly absolved the US military of any blame.

Rumsfeld’s response to the latest news was just as contemptuous. He simply declared that civilian casualties were inevitable. “It is going to happen. It always has and I’m afraid it always will. And the task for all of us is to see that it is as limited as possible,” he said. In other words, the Pentagon will place no limits or constraints on its operations in Afghanistan, making further tragedies a certainty.

In the absence of any official figures, it is difficult to ascertain just how widespread such incidents are. US academic Marc Herold has maintained and updated a list of civilian casualties, day-by-day, since the start of US bombing last October. Based on his incomplete information gleaned from the region and internationally, he makes the rather conservative estimate that between 3,100 and 3,500 civilians have been killed due to US military operations. The figure does not include civilians who have died from injuries or indirectly due to starvation and disease or the hundreds of Taliban POWs slaughtered late last year in northern Afghanistan by Northern Alliance troops operating alongside US military and CIA advisers.

The latest massacre in Kararak underscores the real motivations behind Washington’s opposition to the establishment of the International Criminal Court. Despite all the caveats and restrictions placed on the court’s jurisdiction and operation, Bush, his cronies and underlings do not want to run the risk that by some quirk of fate they wind up in the dock for their crimes against humanity in Afghanistan and elsewhere.



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