

# Anti-US protest in Kabul: a sign of wider anger in Afghanistan

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The slaughter of at least 45 civilians by US warplanes in a raid in central Uruzgan province on Monday has prompted the first anti-US demonstration in Kabul. Around 200 Afghans, many of them women clad in traditional burqas, marched through the street bringing mid-morning traffic to a halt on Wednesday, to protest against the rising toll of civilian casualties. Most of the dead and injured in the latest incident were women and young children who were guests at a wedding celebration in the small village of Kakarak.

The protest is just the tip of the iceberg. Ongoing US bombing and search-and-destroy operations in rural towns and villages along with a contemptuous indifference to the rising toll of civilian casualties has generated widespread hostility, anger and opposition to the American presence. Just nine months after the Bush administration launched its military intervention, any pretence that the US is waging a war of liberation for the benefit of the Afghan people is rapidly being stripped away. What is being revealed is that Washington is conducting a brutal neo-colonial occupation to further its own strategic and economic interests in the region.

The protest in Kabul made a very cautious appeal. Outside the UN compound, one of the organisers read from a prepared statement that declared: "We condemn terrorism. We are not against the Americans, but it doesn't mean they should drop bombs on residents, happy ceremonies and sanctuaries instead of military targets. The US should get through to its officers that this kind of incident could destroy relations and the trust between the two nations."

But the demonstration is symptomatic of far deeper resentment and hostility. Uruzgan provincial governor Jan Mohammed Khan, who was himself appointed by the US-backed regime in Kabul, demanded that the US military hand over the "spies" who had provided the information that led to the air attack on Kakarak. "If Americans don't stop killing civilians, there will be a holy war against them in my province... This has to stop, or people will fight Americans just like they did Russians [in the 1980s]."

Uruzgan, along with other largely Pashtun provinces in the south and east of the country, have borne the full brunt of US attacks. No official tally has been made of the number of civilians killed by US bombing raids and ground operations. But conservative unofficial estimates place the figure in the thousands and do not include those that have subsequently died from their injuries.

Anger is clearly mounting throughout Afghanistan. Reacting to news of Monday's attack, Jabbar, a grocer, in Kabul told Associated Press: "We consider the Americans our liberators, but after this, they may soon become occupiers. They should be here for peace, not death." A customer in Jabbar's store, Raz Mohammed, commented: "Americans made so many mistakes here, and we cannot accept that

hitting a wedding party was just another one. They should set their aiming devices right, or just pack up and go. We fought the Russians in the 1980s, we'll fight the Americans if need be."

Another Kabul resident, Sahibad, who lost two of his own children during a US bombing raid in October told a reporter for the *EurasiaNet* website: "When I heard about the bombing in Uruzgan, I thought the day I lost my kids had returned. My heart bleeds for the families who now have to dig through the rubble for their loved ones, like I did. The people that are supposed to be helping us are hurting us. We don't want to start hating Americans, but if they keep making mistakes like this, we have no choice... Why do they use bombs, it is such an inaccurate way of getting the enemy. One slip of the hand and you could kill hundreds or thousands of people."

Such is the hostility that Afghanistan's transitional president Hamid Karzai felt compelled for the first time to make a muted criticism of US actions. He summoned Lieutenant General Dan McNeill, commander of US forces in Afghanistan, and other US officials to his office on Tuesday. According to an official statement, Karzai "strongly advised them of the grave concern and sorrow" over the incident and called on the US military to "take all necessary measures to ensure that military activities to capture terrorist groups do not harm innocent Afghan civilians."

Karzai's actions will, however, do nothing to restrain US military which acts as an occupying force, carrying out its operations without even token reference to the pro-US regime in Kabul. Among ordinary Afghans, Karzai's timid protest has been met with contempt. As Safiqullah, a merchant in Kabul, angrily told the press: "What is this 'all necessary measures'? He should've told the Americans: 'If this happens again, out of our country.' The Americans didn't even say 'We are sorry' for what happened. Probably they'll soon say it was Afghans who killed women and children at that wedding party."

Some of those injured in Monday's attack were brought to the southern city of Kandahar, some 160km to the southwest of Kakarak. The criticism was just as vehement there. Ahmed Jawad, a doctor at Mirwais Hospital, told the *International Herald Tribune*: "We heard that this is a computerised war, and we have seen on television that the American warplanes can pick out objects as close as four millimetres from the ground. How can they mistake a wedding party for an attack?"

Another doctor noted that many rural Pashtuns carry automatic weapons and wear large black turbans and robes similar to those of the Taliban fighters. "But that does not mean they are Taliban," he said. "If the Americans suspect there are real Taliban somewhere, they should inspect the area first and control it. Even if someone does not shoot at them, it is not fair to bomb villages where there are so many

people.”

Some of the victims have described the carnage that took place at the wedding festivities when US warplanes attacked the rural village around 2am. “Everyone was making so much noise that we never heard the sound of the planes,” Shahbibibi, 30, a seamstress, whose leg was broken, explained. “Then the bombs came and we started running. There was so much dust we couldn’t see.”

Her husband, Amillah, 35, added: “If there were Taliban or Arabs in the area, they would never have let us make such a wedding party. They did not allow people to make music or beat drums; they said it was not Islamic.” A farmer, Abdul Bari, 30, who was comforting his heavily-bandaged, six-year-old nephew, Ghulam, said: “Fifteen people from my home are dead. My wife, my brother, everyone is dead. We don’t know why the Americans hate us.” Doctors at the Mirwais hospital explained that Ghulam, who lost both his parents in the raid, almost died of his injuries as well.

Ma’amoor Abdul Qayyum, a retired local official, said he saw his 11-year-old son die in front of him. “The Americans have destroyed us. We have neither seen Al Qaeda nor Taliban but they bombed us. What did we do wrong?”

The US military has so far refused to accept any responsibility for the tragedy in Kakarak or provide any answers as to why the wedding celebration was bombed. A combined team of US and Afghan officials has been dispatched to the area to investigate the deaths and is due to return to Kabul today. According to Pentagon spokeswoman Victoria Clarke, “We just don’t have enough information to believe or disbelieve anything at this point.”

But the lack of information has not stopped Clarke and other US spokespersons from spreading often contradictory stories, all of which serve a common purpose: to question or belittle the massacre and to pin the blame on the victims themselves.

Clarke told the media that US investigators at the site “saw some evidence of damage, but there was no determination of what caused the damage.” They found no bodies or graves, she added, the obvious implication being that the events had simply been concocted. According to Islamic tradition, however, the dead have to be buried quickly. Moreover, as a reporter for the US military forces magazine *Stars and Stripes* noted, local villagers had offered to take the team to the gravesites.

Central to the Pentagon’s justification for the attack is a claim that US aircraft had repeatedly come under attack from anti-aircraft guns, one of which had been firing from the compound where the wedding celebration was taking place. According to Major Gary Tallman, spokesman for the investing team, hundreds of US and allied soldiers had been in the area for weeks, had fought gun battles with “enemy forces” and identified six sites that had anti-aircraft guns.

Tallman claimed that American forces had reliable information that senior Taliban leaders were sheltering in the tiny village and that an anti-aircraft gun had fired on US warplanes. Last Sunday night US troops were positioning to surround and search the village when they saw more anti-aircraft fire and called for support from an AC-130 gunship which struck the village and other sites in the area. The AC-130, which is designed to destroy tanks, is a slow-flying, heavily armoured aircraft that is capable of laying down a withering fire from a howitzer that shoots 105 mm shells and other large-calibre cannons.

After examining the site, however, Tallman was forced to concede that the team found no wreckage of an anti-aircraft gun or any evidence that one had been fired from the compound. At Bagram airbase, US military spokesman Colonel Roger King tried to fill in the

gap left by the missing gun, saying that the investigators had seen some guns mounted on cars. King would not, however, provide any details as to where or the type and calibre of the weapons. General Gregory Newbold, director of operations on the Pentagon’s Joint Staff, added his own angle, saying that an arms dump had been found—16km from the village. “It’s symptomatic of the area and the capabilities that they have,” he said.

All of these accounts tacitly assume, of course, that the victims are lying. A number of villagers have told the media that gunshots were fired during the wedding celebration—a longstanding tradition in rural Afghanistan—but that there had been no shooting for several hours prior to the attack. Residents now put the toll at 44 killed and at least 100 injured. They have repeatedly insisted that there were no Taliban nor Al Qaeda leaders in the village. Karzai’s chief of staff, Tayeb Jawed, explained that those at the wedding ceremony were supporters of the present administration in Kabul. “The president knew personally some of those who were killed,” he said.

Their statements have not stopped Pentagon spokespersons from reeling off their stock-standard excuses. Victoria Clarke told the press that it was “unclear” whether the Taliban had used “human shields” in this episode. “It is not unusual for the Al Qaeda or the Taliban to place weapons and ammunition and fighters in areas where people, civilians, are living, around schools, areas like that,” she said. Why, even assuming that the “missing gun” suddenly appears, Karzai’s close supporters would allow their compound and a wedding ceremony to be used as a “human shield,” Clarke did not explain.

General Newbold offered an even more sweeping rationalisation, declaring: “This is an area of enormous sympathy for the Taliban and Al Qaeda.” Even if the statement were true, which is highly unlikely, “sympathy” is no justification for the slaughter of civilians. Far more probable is that the growing hostility to the US presence is simply interpreted by the US military as “sympathy for the Taliban and Al Qaeda”. Just as in Vietnam, where all Vietnamese became “gooks,” Afghans, particularly those in former Taliban strongholds, are increasingly treated as enemies, less than human and therefore expendable.

The outlook underlying all these excuses and lies is that of all invaders: that the US has the right to send its forces throughout the length and breadth of the country, at any time of the day and night, to attack any target considered “a threat” to American military occupation. Any fire is deemed hostile and immediately brings down the full weight of US hi-tech weaponry, regardless of the consequences. Civilian deaths, when grudgingly acknowledged at all, are simply dismissed as the unfortunate but inevitable casualties of war.



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