

Mounting anger over US atrocities in Afghanistan

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Three weeks after an American AC-130 gunship killed and injured more than 100 civilians in the small Afghan village of Kakarak, US military officials have refused to admit that the raid was a mistake or to rule out similar actions in the future. The massacre and the dismissive attitude of US officials have added to the mounting anger among ethnic Pashtuns in Uruzgan and neighbouring provinces in the country's south and east.

Comments by US Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz in Afghanistan last week simply underscore the callous indifference of the Bush administration to the rising civilian toll caused by American bombing and military operations. Speaking to reporters at the Bagram air base north of Kabul, Wolfowitz said the US had "no regrets about going after the bad guys". "There was very little doubt," he said, that there were terrorists or "people harbouring terrorists" in the area attacked by US warplanes.

Neither Wolfowitz nor any other US official has provided any evidence to back up this assertion. Nor have they explained why a wedding celebration organised by supporters of the US-backed Afghan president Hamid Karzai was raked with cannon and machine gun fire by the AC-130. The attack in the early hours of July 1 was responsible for most of the 54 dead and 120 injured, many of them women and children. Several other villages were hit on the same night.

US officials continue to claim that aircrew and US Special Forces troops observed anti-aircraft fire coming from the compound. A preliminary US investigative team failed to find any sign of a large calibre gun at the spot. Last week Air Force Brigadier General John W. Rosa Jr, the deputy director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, cast further doubt on the story when he told reporters: "I can't say unequivocally that the AC-130 was fired on." Other officials, however,

quickly issued a "clarification," reasserting the initial claims but offering no further evidence.

The preliminary US investigation also played down the death toll, claiming it found no evidence of large numbers of deaths and injuries. The comments directly contradict the statements of Afghan officials and on-the-spot reports from a number of journalists who have interviewed survivors of the raid in Kakarak itself and in hospitals in Kandahar and Kabul.

A firsthand report published on July 8 in the *New York Times* described the aftermath of the raid on the village. "Human flesh was still hanging on the tree five days after the attack, and more putrefying remains were tangled in the branches of a pomegranate tree, its bright scarlet flowers still blooming... Sahib Jan, 25, a neighbour who escaped the worst of the bombardment, was among the first to help the wounded and gather up the dead. Walking through the compound five days later, he named those who had been killed, pointing out the blood stains and the shreds of shrapnel still lying around."

One villager, Pir Jan, explained to the reporter that US Special Forces had entered Kakarak after the raid "searching the houses and tying the hands even of the women". He said their attitude changed when they came across the carnage in the compound. "They told me through a translator that they had made a mistake," Jan said. "They said, 'We are sorry, but what's done cannot be undone'." No official admission of responsibility has been made, however.

All that Wolfowitz would admit during a press conference in Kabul last week was that the evidence "suggests" that innocent people were killed, quickly adding: "In a combat zone, unfortunately mistakes are made." He repeated several times that the role of US forces was one of "liberation, not occupation". But

many Afghans, particularly those of the Pashtun majority, who have had to endure 10 months of arbitrary US military operations, are beginning to voice their opposition to the American colonial-style occupation of Afghanistan.

Following the raid on Kakarak, six provincial governors, all of them sympathetic to Washington, issued a statement calling on the US military to seek their permission before launching operations in their areas. “We have already decided the matter,” declared Kandahar governor Gul Agha Shirzai. “In the future, the Americans cannot conduct their operations without the approval of the council. They must also take Afghan forces with them.” He has proposed the establishment of an Afghan rapid reaction force, as well as a border guard, to operate alongside the US military in the south and east.

The Pentagon quickly dismissed any suggestion that restrictions would be placed on its operations. US Central Command spokesman Major Ralph Mills insisted that the US military already coordinated with the Karzai administration. “We will continue to do what we can to coordinate,” he said. “However if it’s a situation of imminent danger, we are going to continue to do what we believe is right and take action appropriately.” In other words, the Pentagon will continue its actions when and where it pleases.

The criticism of US military actions by Gul Agha and other provincial officials reflects a groundswell of hostility, which they are seeking to contain. The angry mood among Pashtuns is being openly, and rather nervously, discussed in sections of the US media, concerned at the potential for open rebellion. The US raid on Kakarak has already provoked the first anti-US protest in Kabul.

Time magazine commented: “Such dramas [the carnage in Kakarak] add to the sense that the US may be losing the battle for the hearts and minds of Afghans. That’s especially true in the south, where most of the American military action is now concentrated and where US propaganda has to contend with an overheated rumour mill in the teahouses and bazaars. Inevitably, [President] Karzai is linked to America’s mistakes...

“[O]fficials in Kabul affiliated with the UN and other aid organisations are now worried that America’s obsession with the dangers of Afghanistan and its

single-minded pursuit of military objectives may even be making things worse... Most remember that the Soviets enjoyed a honeymoon after they invaded the country in 1979. Soon enough, the locals turned against them.”

Anger among Pashtun leaders has been compounded by the heavy-handed manner in which the Karzai administration was inserted at the loya jirga [grand tribal assembly] last month and the predominance of ethnic Tajiks in the key security ministries. An article in the *International Herald Tribune* described how US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad bullied former king Zahir Shah into withdrawing his candidacy for the post of transitional president. “Khalilzad is now reviled as ‘the viceroy’ by many Pashtuns, who refer to the once-welcome US forces in Afghanistan as an ‘army of occupation’,” the article noted.

Far from altering course, however, the reaction of the Bush administration to the massacre in Kakarak indicates that it intends to consolidate its military and political grip in Afghanistan as part of broader plans to dominate the resource-rich Central Asian region. Any threat to its forces or to the compliant Karzai regime in Kabul will be responded to with the same methods used to oust the Taliban regime.



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