

# Continuing civilian deaths in US operations in Afghanistan

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19 March 2003

More than a year after the US military invaded Afghanistan and toppled the Taliban regime with the aid of its Northern Alliance allies, over 7,000 US troops remain in the country engaged in operations purportedly aimed at rooting out “Al Qaeda/Taliban remnants”. These operations, which continue to add to the toll of civilian casualties, receive scant media coverage.

Last month, hundreds of US soldiers were involved in a three-week operation in the remote Baghran Valley in the southern Helmand province. During the first week of Operation Eagle Fury, US forces claimed to have killed 20 Taliban/Al Qaeda militants. Who they killed, however, is still unclear.

Locals accused US forces of being responsible for the deaths of a number of civilians. According to a BBC report, local officials claimed that at least 17 people, mainly women and children, died during the operation. A BBC correspondent in Kandahar spoke to eyewitnesses who said 13 people died when US bombing targeted a civilian area. Other reports in the Pakistani press put the death toll higher.

US military spokesman Colonel Roger King denied there had been any civilian deaths. “Battle damage assessment conducted in support of operation Eagle Fury has not indicated any non-combatant casualties to date,” he declared. Later US officials grudgingly admitted to one casualty—an eight-year-old boy who was hit by shrapnel. No details were provided.

Late last month, a *New York Times* reporter visited Lejay, one of the villages in the Baghran Valley raided by the US special forces, and gave a glimpse of what took place there.

The operation at Lejay began before dawn on February 10, when the troops and their vehicles were landed by helicopter. US officials claimed that the

troops ran into a “planned ambush”. But in the darkness, it was difficult to say who was firing, how it started or why.

“People here described a scene of panic in the village,” the article stated. “It was still dark, and people were at the mosque when the shooting began, they said. Most able-bodied men fled, some running to the river on the west side, some taking to the hills to the east. The elders walked to the entrance of the village to try to talk to the American soldiers.”

One villager Shaista Gul said: “Everyone was scared and tried to flee.” Three of his brothers fled with their sheep to the surrounding mountainside and hid in a cave, but the Special Forces called in an air strike, which killed one of them—Anar Gul, aged 25.

Abdul Wahab, a shopkeeper who took part in a four-man delegation to make a protest in Kabul, told the *New York Times*: “We hate them for this. In our culture, we hate it when someone enters our house without our permission. President Bush says he wants peace and law and order in Afghanistan. This was outside the law and human rights.”

Villagers complained in particular that elders had been rounded up and handcuffed. They alleged that some of the Afghan troops accompanying the US Special Forces had ransacked and looted a number of houses. No compensation had been paid.

Colonel John Campbell, commander of the task force in southern Afghanistan, bluntly justified the operation, declaring: “I’m not going after one or two guys. Anytime we go in, we disrupt their communications and planning, and put people on the run and in hiding.”

Aware of the growing hostility to the US military presence, Campbell said he had flown in a container of items, including blankets and food, following operation Eagle Fury, “so we don’t leave a bad taste behind.”

The operation in the Baghran Valley was clearly more extensive than most. But US troops are harassing and terrorising the local population, particularly in the Pashtun areas of the south and east, on an ongoing basis.

Increasingly even the pretences are being dropped. King, the US military spokesman, commented during operation Eagle Fury that he could not be sure of the loyalties of those firing on US troops. “They fall under the heading of personnel who are against the coalition and against the government of Afghanistan.”

In other words, the US is not hunting down Al Qaeda or Taliban “terrorists” but anyone who opposes its neo-colonial occupation of the country and its puppet regime in Kabul.



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