

# US military kills 11 civilians in ongoing war in Afghanistan

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More than a year after the fall of the Taliban regime, American forces and their Afghan allies are waging a brutal, little-reported war aimed at stamping out opposition to the US-installed regime in Kabul.

Occasionally, the fighting hits the international news. On Wednesday, US military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Douglas Lefforge announced that a US warplane had killed 11 civilians—seven women and four men—when a 1,000-pound laser guided bomb “missed its target” and hit a house. Another man was injured.

Lefforge described the deaths as “a tragic incident” but provided no explanation as to how or why a precision bomb should hit a house, rather than enemy fighters. He indicated that the matter would be investigated. Previous US investigations of similar “incidents” in Afghanistan have invariably exonerated American forces.

In most cases, the US military has blamed the victims, claiming them to be “Taliban” or “Al Qaeda” fighters or supporters. But on this occasion, as Afghan Interior Minister Ali Jalali explained: “The American response was very rapid because their mistake was very clear. They hit a family compound.”

The Governor of Paktika Province, Mohammed Ali Jalai, reacted angrily: “We condemn these killings. They were neither Al Qaeda nor Taliban. There were only innocent civilians. We have told them [the Americans] repeatedly that they need to try to be precise when they target something.”

The bombing took place near the town of Shkin, some 200km south of Kabul and close to the border with Pakistan. On Tuesday night, a small group of “enemy forces” attacked an Afghan military checkpoint providing security for a nearby US base, wounding four Afghan soldiers. In the ensuing pursuit, two US Harrier jets were called in to bomb the fleeing fighters. One

unleashed the missile that hit the compound.

The latest civilian deaths will inevitably provoke further anti-US sentiment and fuel the armed resistance that has been growing, particularly among Pashtun villagers in the east and south. As Interior Minister Jalali noted: “There is a lot of trouble in this area. That’s why our forces and the US forces maintain a strong presence there. They are regularly being attacked.”

Who is doing the attacking is unclear. The former Taliban leaders have called for a holy war against US forces and their allies. Former Afghan prime minister and Mujaheddin militia leader Gullbuddin Hekmatyar and his Hezb-e-Islami party now appears to have joined them.

But the opposition to the US occupation is far broader than just the Taliban and Hezb-e-Islami forces. A year and a half of ongoing US operations, house-to-house searches, arbitrary detentions and the rising toll of civilian deaths have created deep resentment. Added to that is the failure of the US or its allies in Kabul to address any of the country’s immense social problems. It is not surprising that there are a rising number of sporadic guerrilla attacks.

The response of the US military has been to mount what in the Vietnam War were known as “search and destroy” operations. These are military sweeps of areas known to be hostile to the Karzai government to kill or round up suspected opponents and terrorise the population. And, as in Vietnam, the result is more hostility and more attacks.

A recent article entitled “The forgotten first stop in the ‘war on terror’”, on the *Asia Times* website noted: “In the past eight weeks, there have been more than one rocket attack per day targetting coalition forces, and 50 civilians and government soldiers have been killed or

wounded in insurgent violence in the south of the country... Under such conditions it hardly seems accurate to refer to Afghanistan as a post-conflict society.”

Its author Mark Sedra confirmed that US military operations were heightening hostility. “By their heavy-handed tactics in Pashtun areas of the country, US troops have alienated much of the populace. In particular, their indiscriminate use of air power, which has killed scores of civilians and their lack of sensitivity to indigenous laws and customs have been viewed with seething resentment. According to recent reports in the Afghan press, US Special Forces, during routine sweeps of Afghan villages searching for weapons and members of resistance groups, have physically abused villagers, damaged personal property, and subjected women to body searches, a major affront to a family’s honour.”

Over the last month alone, there have been at least three major US military operations.

On March 20, Operation Valiant Strike was launched to search caves and villages southeast of the city of Kandahar, involving some 600 US and allied troops backed by helicopter gunships. According to military spokesman Colonel King: “There is probably the potential for there to be 50 to 100 of the people you would classify as enemy or people who support them in the area we are operating in.”

The scanty reports of its progress indicated sporadic fighting as US forces were fired on by small arms and rockets. Six US troops were killed when a helicopter crashed and several caches of arms were found. A number of arrests were made. Although the US military denied it, the operation, which the largest for over a year, appears to have been aimed at preempting an expected upsurge of attacks provoked by the US invasion of Iraq.

US military spokesmen played down the situation in Afghanistan following the outbreak of war in Iraq but he did concede: “I think there probably was, at least in the first 24 hours, a flurry of activity directed toward coalition forces, but it seems to have gotten back pretty much to the status we had beforehand.”

On March 28, a similar operation known as “Desert Lion” was launched in Kohe Safi mountains in the northeast of the country. The operation began with air strikes followed up with searches by ground troops,

who reportedly uncovered two caches of arms and little else.

The third operation was underway last week in the Tor Ghar mountain range in southeastern Afghanistan. Some 45 US Special Forces troops and 250 Afghan soldiers caught up with an estimated 40 to 60 “Taliban fighters” on April 3. According to US military spokesmen, Harrier jets, B-1 bombers, A-10 warplanes and helicopter gunships pounded the area over a 14-hour period using 35,000 pounds of ordinance. One fighter was killed, 11 were captured and the rest escaped.

The military sweep followed the death of a Red Cross worker Ricardo Munguia on March 27 near Kandahar. Munguia, an engineer involved in developing water wells, was stopped while returning to the city by car and summarily executed. Two days later an ambush in neighbouring Helmand Province resulted in the deaths of two US military personnel and the wounding of another and three Afghan soldiers.

Kandahar governor Gul Afgha Shirzai reacted to Munguia’s death by dispatching 1,000 troops across the area to hunt down the killers. He also issuing a decree giving all former Taliban supporters 10 days to leave the region if not vouched for by tribal elders.

Shirzai’s spokesman Khalid Pashtoon pessimistically explained: “The last few weeks the situation in Kandahar was getting worse day by day. The increase in violent incidents started about five months ago, but became more common after [the start of] the Iraq war.”

The Bush administration has proclaimed Afghanistan to have been a great success, dismissing suggestions that the US military is becoming bogged down in a vicious war of attrition. But that is exactly what is taking place—with disastrous consequences for the Afghan people.



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