

US air strike kills nine children in Afghanistan

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A US air attack aimed at assassinating an anti-government militant claimed the lives of nine children Saturday in Afghanistan. The massacre took place in Ghazni province, about 100 miles southwest of the capital, Kabul.

The children were apparently playing ball in a dusty field in the isolated village of Hutala when they came under fire from a US A-10 "Thunderbolt" attack jet. The heavily armored plane, also known as a "warthog," is designed to attack tanks and fortified positions and is equipped with sidewinder missiles as well as twin 30-mm gatling guns capable of firing 3,900 rounds a minute.

A reporter for Associated Press who visited the village said he saw a field pockmarked with dozens of small craters together with pools of blood and littered with hats, shoes and other items of children's clothing.

"They were just playing ball and then the shots came down," Hamidullah told the Associated Press. His eight-year-old son Habibullah was among the dead.

US troops, including an army general, helicoptered into the village to offer condolences, and a US military spokesman described villagers as "pretty understanding" about the killing of the nine children. According to the AP, however, local residents remained distraught and angry. "First they fire their rockets. Then they say it was a mistake," said Haji Amir Mohammed. "How can we forgive them?"

Maj. Christopher West, spokesman for the US military command at Bagram Air Base, told the AP: "At the time we initiated the attack, we did not know there were children nearby." He added that after the air attack, US troops entered the area and "found the bodies of both the intended victim and those of nine children nearby."

The spokesman said that the US military was conducting an investigation of the incident and "will make every effort to assist the families of these innocent casualties." In the past, the US military has rejected any obligation to compensate victims' families in what it refers to as a "war zone," and it was unclear what assistance it could give to Afghans grieving the deaths of their young children.

Major West added a statement that the US occupation

forces in Afghanistan have repeatedly issued in the wake of this type of massacre: "We regret the loss of innocent life and we follow stringent rules of engagement to specifically avoid this type of incident while continuing to target terrorists who threaten the future of Afghanistan."

How the use of the indiscriminate firepower of an A-10 attack jet in the attempt to kill a single individual reflects these "stringent rules of engagement," the spokesman did not spell out.

The target of the attack was Mullah Wazir, a minor district leader in Afghanistan's former Taliban regime, which was overthrown by the US invasion in 2001. Witnesses in the area said he was not among the victims of the US air strike and had left the village several days before the air strike. A mud house that reportedly belonged to Wazir was heavily damaged in the raid.

The US military said it would conduct DNA tests on the remains of a man who was killed with the children to determine if he was the attack's intended victim.

"There are no terrorists, no Taliban or Al Qaeda here, just poor people," villager Abdul Majid Farooqi told the AP.

A spokesman for the Ghazni provincial governor said that the US military went after Wazir on suspicion that he was behind an attempt to bring down US helicopters with ground fire the previous day. US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad described him as "a known financier, organizer and facilitator of terrorist activity," including recent attacks on aid workers and crews working on the Kabul-Kandahar highway.

The air raid on Hutala appears to be part of an intensified crackdown in response to the growing resistance faced by the occupation force in Afghanistan, consisting of 11,500 US troops, in addition to a 5,700-strong NATO peacekeeping force in Kabul. Five US soldiers were killed and seven wounded when a transport helicopter crashed November 23 north of Kabul. The Pentagon claimed that the cause of the crash was unknown, but witnesses said that they saw an explosion before it hit the ground.

A grenade attack last Wednesday in Kandahar, apparently

the work of the Taliban, wounded two US soldiers, one of them seriously. And on the following evening, the US Embassy in Kabul was the target of a rocket attack just hours after US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had ended a one-day visit to the country, making it clear that even the capital remains insecure. On the same day, a US Army Special Forces base in Khost, near the Pakistan border, came under attack by a force of Taliban militants.

On the day of the air strike in Hutala, a bomb ripped through a crowded marketplace in Kandahar, wounding 20 Afghans. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack, saying that it had been aimed at US soldiers shopping there, but that the device detonated late.

Paralleling the attacks on occupation forces has been the targeting of civilian contractors and aid workers, at least 13 of whom have been killed since March. The attacks forced the United Nations to announce last month that it is halting the work of all foreign aid workers in the south and east of the country.

Also over the weekend, suspected Taliban militants abducted two Turkish and two Indian engineers.

The UN called for an inquiry into the massacre of the children in Hutala. It issued an unusually harsh denunciation of the killings, pointing out that they are only the latest in a series of “accidental” bloodbaths carried out against Afghanistan’s civilian population.

The deaths of the children, the UN said, “adds to the sense of fear and insecurity” plaguing the population of the strife-torn country. A statement issued by Lakhdar Brahimi, UN special envoy to Afghanistan, said the UN was “profoundly distressed at the news that nine children were killed on Saturday in Ghazni as a result of coalition military action ... these kinds of mistakes do have a negative impact among the population. We have seen this before, so it’s not as if we’re speaking without experience.”

Just last month, six civilians were killed in an air strike in southern Paktika province, and barely three weeks before that, eight members of a single family, most of them children, lost their lives in a similar attack in Nuristan province.

Afghan officials confirmed in September that an attack by US warplanes killed 10 people, including eight nomadic tribesmen in the Naubahar district, northeast of Kandahar. Initially, US military officials denied that any civilians died in the incident, but the Pentagon has subsequently announced an investigation.

The worst single previous “mistake” by the US military occurred in July of last year, when an AC-130 gunship opened fire on a wedding celebration in the central Afghan village of Karkarak, killing as many as 54 civilians and wounding over 100.

These are not isolated incidents, but regular occurrences in a bloody colonial-style war. According to one documented estimate prepared by Professor Marc Herold of the University of New Hampshire, between 3,000 and 3,400 civilians were killed in the first 18 months of the US invasion/occupation alone, most of them victims of bombings, missile attacks and strafing by US warplanes.

The UN reaction to this latest killing of the nine children reflects the growing fear that heavy-handed repression by US troops will only intensify popular opposition and resistance to the occupation and the US-installed government of President Hamid Karzai, particularly in the southern and eastern region, home to the Pashtuns, Afghanistan’s largest ethnic group.

The area is seething over acts of repression by the US military in hunting down the Taliban and other forces opposed to the occupation, resentment that the Pashtuns are grossly underrepresented in the Karzai provisional government and the fact that aid there has been largely cut off due to the military conflict.

The UN is responsible for organizing the drafting of a constitution, set to begin this week, and a national election scheduled for next June. Last week, less than one third of the delegates showed up for a preliminary session leading up to the *loya jirga*, a hand-picked assembly that is supposed to approve a constitution. Taliban insurgents have threatened retaliation against anyone participating in the process.

There are increasing concerns that the level of resistance inside Afghanistan could derail the elections or create conditions in which it is impossible to register voters in whole regions, making any vote manifestly illegitimate.

“The window of opportunity to get it right before all the Pashtuns turn against us is closing rapidly,” one US official told the *Los Angeles Times* last week.



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