

US military kills six Afghan children in new atrocity

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US forces killed six children and two adults when they attacked a farm compound in Afghanistan's eastern Paktia province December 5. The eight people were sleeping when American troops launched an air and ground assault in the middle of the night, knocking down a wall and crushing them. The compound allegedly contained a cache of weapons.

The attack on the mud-walled village was part of Operation Avalanche, aimed at tracking down Taliban and other anti-government forces. This operation, launched December 2 and involving 2,000 US troops, is the largest since the overthrow of the Taliban regime two years ago.

Nine children died December 6 during a US air attack on Ghazni province, 100 miles southwest of Kabul, Afghanistan's capital. American military officials have now acknowledged that the target of the deadly raid, Mullah Wazir, was probably not present at the time. According to villagers, the man thought to be Wazir and killed in the attack was a local laborer who had just returned from Iran.

The ostensible target of the raid in Paktia province was Mullah Jalani, a local commander. The US military alleges that Jalani, who had apparently left the area days before, is an associate of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar—a former prime minister who has aligned himself with anti-government forces—and has been involved in attacks on US-led coalition forces.

Pamela Constable in the *Washington Post* described local residents as bewildered by the attack. They describe Jalani “as a controversial local tribal and militia leader who had crossed swords with provincial officials and changed sides several times in the region's seesawing political struggles.... But most people interviewed insisted that Jalani was neither a terrorist nor a threat to the government, and some

professed outrage and shock at the US attack. They noted that, until recently, Jalani had served as district commissioner and was also a leader of the local tribal council. Several residents said Jalani had supported the US military campaign and met often with US and Afghan troops based in Gardez, the provincial capital 20 miles west of here.”

The family that was killed, originally from Logar province, was visiting as guests of the tribe that controls the district. The dead were Ikhtar Gul, 35, a farmer; Khela, his wife; four daughters, Ahmad Khela, Daulat Zai, Anara and Kadran; and two sons, Asif and Nematullah. The children were aged 1 to 12.

US officials defended the atrocity in Paktia, blaming the deaths on the sleeping victims. “In this incident,” declared Lt. Col. Brian Hilferty, “if noncombatants surround themselves with thousands of weapons and hundreds of rounds of ammunition and howitzers and mortars in a compound known to be used by a terrorist, we are not completely responsible for the consequences.” Hilferty claimed that Jalani had ties to the Al Qaeda network and Afghan insurgents loyal to the former Taliban regime.

Constable in the *Post* notes: “Some residents and tribal leaders scoffed at such descriptions, saying Jalani had always strongly opposed the Taliban and had frequent dealings with US military forces here.”

US Ambassador Zalmay Khalizad told the *Post* that it was “always a tragedy when children die” and that “we do everything we can to avoid civilian deaths.” However, he said, both Afghan and foreign forces “face a severe threat” from guerrillas who are trying to “derail” Afghanistan's progress. He claimed that the Afghan people were “overwhelmingly” in support of the American effort.

When asked if the US was clamping down on local

warlords resisting its puppet regime in Kabul, Hilferty commented, referring to the assassination attempt against Jalani: “If they have dual allegiances we have to discuss with them what their real allegiance is.”

Afghan government officials suggested that the attacks on civilians would have a harmful impact on US attempts to win the “hearts and minds” of the inhabitants of the Pashtun-dominated region. “The first news this week was bad enough; the second is obviously tragic,” Foreign Ministry spokesman Omar Samad told Reuters.

“We don’t know if Hajji Jalani is alive or dead, and we don’t understand the reason for this disaster,” commented Mahmud Yusuf, a tribal leader from the district. “If he committed a crime, he should be brought to justice, but the Americans killed innocent people for nothing, and this is a very bad work.” Afghan government-run television neglected to mention the children’s deaths. A government spokesman claimed this was not a deliberate attempt to keep the news from the Afghan people.

Afghans who knew of the incident were outraged over the second such mass killing of innocents in a week. A 20-year-old shopkeeper in Kabul, Wahid Ullah, told *CBS News*, “This is terrible and will sadden people greatly. This will have bad consequences for the Americans in the future. People will grow to hate them, day by day.”

The UN’s Manoel de Almeida e Silva told the media, “We believe that observance of international humanitarian law would help in avoiding these kinds of situations.” When asked if he thought the US was violating international laws, including the obligation to protect civilians, Almeida e Silva said, “It’s up to them to decide whether they are observing all of its aspects.” Leaving it up to the alleged perpetrators is a novel means of determining whether laws have been broken.

Lt. Col. Hilferty commented, “I can’t guarantee that we will not injure more civilians.” Apparently Operation Avalanche has so far done nothing but “injure” civilians. The operation has resulted in the deaths of 15 children, but has yet to encounter the enemy. A previous action, Operation Mountain Resolve, also failed to inflict serious damage on the Taliban forces, but reportedly caused the deaths of 100 civilians. An Afghan government spokesman offered assurances that in Operation Avalanche there would be

“no civilian casualties because the Afghan troops are being advised in advance of air strikes.”

Commentators have suggested that one of the real purposes of Operation Avalanche is to keep the Taliban at bay while the *loya jirga* (grand assembly), gathering some 500 delegates, gets under way in Kabul. The meeting is supposed to adopt a constitution and prepare for elections next years.

In the eastern Afghan city of Jalalabad, a gunfight allegedly broke out December 11 after US forces arrested Esmatullah Muabat, the military chief of nearby Laghman province. Hilferty claimed that an American convoy was fired on and returned fire, killing four Afghans. The arrest of Muabat provoked a demonstration the next day by thousands of tribesmen in front of the governor’s office in Mihtarlam, capital of Laghman. The protesters blocked the road from Mihtarlam to Jalalabad, which lies 25 miles to the southwest, and threatened to block the road from Jalalabad to Kabul unless Muabat were released.

Professor March Herold of the University of New Hampshire has estimated that 3,767 civilians were killed in the first nine weeks of the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.



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