

US forces kill 11 more civilians in Afghanistan

David Walsh
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US military forces killed 11 civilians in southern Afghanistan early Sunday morning, according to Afghan officials. Abdul Rahman, chief of Char Chino district, 200 miles south of the capital Kabul, told reporters that a US helicopter attacked a group of people in the village of Saghatho, resulting in the deaths of four children, three women and four men.

Apparently US troops arrived in Saghatho in search of suspected anti-government fighters. Rahman is quoted on AlJazeera.net as saying, "A number of villagers were scared that probably they would be arrested by the Americans so they left their village with their families. As soon as they arrived [at a house] near a river, planes bombed them and killed 11 innocent civilians."

Reuters cites the comments of the governor of Uruzgan province, Jan Mohammed Khan, who said that US troops saw ammunition during their search of the village. During the search, "the people were afraid, they started running. The Americans bombed this home."

Rahman told the Associated Press by telephone, "They were simple villagers, they were not Taliban. I don't know why the US bombed this home. We have informed our authorities." He added that the 11 villagers were buried Sunday in the village, where residents were "very afraid and very angry."

Rahman told Al Jazeera, "I personally went and talked to the Americans about why this incident happened. They said that it was a mistake by our planes and that the people near the river had weapons."

Maj. Steven R. Moon, a US military spokesman in Kabul, had no comment. Lt. Col. Brian Hiltferty, the usual mouthpiece for the US military, told Reuters he did not know about the raid or civilian deaths. AlJazeera notes that a US military spokesman on Monday said that only five "armed anti-coalition members" had been killed over the weekend in

Uruzgan province when coalition forces "engaged from the air." He offered no further details.

According to news accounts, 100 Afghan forces and between 20 and 30 US soldiers had arrested 10 suspects in the region over the previous several days.

In July 2002, US warplanes bombed a wedding party in the village of Kararak in Uruzgan province, killing 48 civilians. US officials claimed their aircraft had been fired at. Afghan officials suggested that American forces had mistaken the traditional exuberant firing of shots into the air as an attack. A resident told the BBC: "There are no Taliban or Al Qaeda or Arabs here. These people were all civilians, women and children."

In December 2003, US forces killed 15 Afghan children in two raids in Paktia and Ghazni provinces. They attacked a farm compound in Paktia December 5, knocking down a wall and killing six children and two adults. The following day in Ghazni the US forces attacked a village, targeting a local tribal chief, Mullah Wazir, and massacred nine children, along with a local laborer who had just returned from Iran.

The four-week Operation Avalanche, during which the 15 children were killed, apparently inflicted more damage on the civilian population than on the Taliban or other anti-government forces. It saw no major military skirmishes. According to officials who announced the termination of the operation—the largest "postwar" military action in Afghanistan—at the end of December, the 2,000 troops who spread out over the country's southern and eastern provinces killed 10 "enemy personnel" and wounded 4. Operation Mountain Resolve before it had the same sort of results, causing the deaths of some 100 civilians.

Afghan guerrillas launched an unusually bold raid January 11 on a US base at Deh Rawud in Uruzgan province. A group of insurgents attacked US forces with assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades, wounding three American soldiers. Rockets fell on

fields near a US airbase in eastern Afghanistan on Saturday, the second barrage in three days. The rockets caused no injuries, according to American officials. Taliban guerrillas claimed last week to have killed ten Afghan soldiers at an army post in the Khashrud district of Nimroz province in the south of the country.

One hundred US soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan since the occupation began in 2001. Thirty civilians and 20 Taliban and anti-government fighters have died in Uruzgan and other provinces since the beginning of the year. Since August 2003 some 600 people have died in various attacks and clashes.

The brutal occupation of Afghanistan, launched on the pretext of “fighting terrorism” in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, has resulted in the deaths of more than 3,700 civilians, according to commentators keeping track of the figures. US forces operate in Afghanistan with particular indifference for human life, following their bombing raids with either denials or grudging admissions.

US and UN officials blame Pakistan for the renewed unrest in eastern and southern Afghanistan. “There is little doubt there is support for destabilisation in Afghanistan in some quarters in Pakistan,” UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi commented in an interview with the BBC last month in Kabul. The BBC continues, “[F]or some observers, the increasing Taliban activity suggests this is the work of more than just ‘rogue elements’ in the Pakistan intelligence agency, the ISI, which has long played the key role in Pakistan’s Afghan policy.”

Pakistani officials, for their part, blame “the deteriorating security situation in southern and eastern provinces on the Afghan government’s own failure to meet the needs of the area’s majority Pashtuns.” Kandahar’s governor admitted to the BBC that “the Afghan government still did not have the means to provide services and jobs in rural areas. A province like Zabul, bordering Kandahar, is virtually off limits for the government. It is said to be run by Taliban sympathizers.”

NATO and UN officials have recently warned about the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and called for the deployment of additional foreign troops. Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, NATO’s new secretary-general, urged the Western powers to offer more troops and equipment

for operations in Afghanistan, warning, according to Reuters, that “the alliance’s credibility was at stake in the violence-torn nation.”

Brahimi, the outgoing UN envoy, called recently for 5,000 more troops to be sent to Afghanistan. He told the Security Council, “For too many Afghans, the daily insecurity they face comes not from resurgent extremism associated with the Taliban ... but from the predatory behavior of local commanders and officials who nominally claim to represent the government.”

General Abdul Rashid Dostum, the notorious warlord, is seeking a senior central government post, according to Agence France Presse. He told reporters January 18, “The post is not important, but I would like to work with the government. I will ask [President Hamid] Karzai to appoint me as defense minister, army chief-of-staff or give me a military position with 20,000 soldiers.” Karzai said he was open to the suggestion: “If he asks for a higher position in the Ministry of Defense, it is a legitimate request and we are thinking about it.” Dostum, a close ally of US forces, presided over the massacre of thousands of prisoners in the desert near Mazar-i-Sharif after the fall of the Taliban in November 2001.



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