

US military reprisal in Afghanistan kills 17 civilians

Peter Symonds
8 July 2005

In what can only be regarded as a bloody act of revenge, the US military last Sunday killed as many as 17 civilians in an air raid on the remote village of Chechal in the northeast Afghan province of Kunar.

The attack took place just five kilometres from where a US Chinook helicopter was shot down, four days before, resulting in the deaths of 16 US special forces personnel—the largest single loss of American troops since the US-led invasion of the country in 2001.

The US troops were sent to rescue a four-member reconnaissance team of US Navy SEALs, which came under heavy attack from anti-US fighters. One wounded team member was found on Saturday and the bodies of two others were found on Monday. A massive operation by US and Afghan government troops is still underway in the area to find the remaining team member.

Few details are available of Sunday's airstrike. Kunar province governor Adadullah Wafa said an initial airstrike destroyed a compound in Chechal. As villagers gathered to look at the damage, the US warplane dropped a second bomb on the same target. According to Wafa, the second explosion killed at least 17 civilians, including women and children.

The US military has acknowledged that a B-52 bomber struck the compound with guided bombs. Pentagon spokeswoman Lawrence di Rita confirmed that civilians had died, but brushed off the incident. "It is obviously an unfortunate situation. It was in the context of counter-terrorism operations... [T]hese things do occur and we obviously regret when they do," she declared.

A US military statement claimed that the targetted compound was the "a known operating base for terrorist attacks" and "a base for a medium-level terrorist leader", but offered no evidence. It then

implied that the dead were family members of the "terrorists" and got what they deserved: "[W]hen enemy forces move their families into the locations where they conduct terrorist operations, they put these innocent civilians at risk."

While not usually confirming civilian deaths, such unsubstantiated statements are the norm for the US military in Iraq, as well as Afghanistan. As is the case in Chechal, they often fly in the face of eyewitnesses. What is striking about this latest atrocity is the timing: just days after the Chinook helicopter was shot down, the US military hit back in a reprisal aimed as much at the local population as the anti-US insurgents.

So blatant was the attack that Washington's puppet regime in Kabul, headed by President Hamid Karzai, was compelled to issue a rare protest. Karzai's spokesman Jawed Ludin declared on Tuesday that the president was "extremely saddened and disturbed" by the deaths in Kunar province and that under no circumstances could such a toll be justified. "We know terrorists kill people, destroy mosques and schools but we should be careful not to cause harm or to kill people. That is not acceptable," he said.

Karzai is of course directly culpable. His administration, which is dependent militarily and financially on Washington, has given the US military carte blanche to operate throughout the country. Most of the resulting civilian detentions, torture and deaths are covered up. When incidents do come to light, as in the case at Chechal, the Karzai administration steps in to try to defuse local anger.

Ahmad Nader Nadery, a member of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, expressed the government's real concern. After praising "all the good work the Americans have done", Nadery warned that killings, such as at Chechal, would "damage America's

image”, and by implication that of the Karzai administration, which faces parliamentary elections in September.

The latest expression of official indignation in Kabul follows a well-worn pattern. In May, for instance, a media report provided details of the systematic torture of Afghan detainees by US military interrogators. Karzai, who was about to leave for a trip to the US, declared that he was “thoroughly shocked” by the revelations. He also announced that he would demand that “no operations inside Afghanistan should take place without the consultation of the Afghan government.” When Bush refused, Karzai said no more. His latest promises to fully investigate the killings in Chechal will undoubtedly go the same way.

Since 2001, US military operations have engendered hostility, hatred and outright opposition among Afghans, particularly in the Pashtun tribal areas in the east and south of the country. Speaking to the *New York Times* last week, Sayed Asadullah Hashimi, an assistant law professor, commented: “Outside Kabul, two-thirds of the people think that the Americans came in to invade and occupy Afghanistan, and that is why day by day the tension is growing. The mood is worsening.”

While clearly supporting the US occupation, Jandad Spinghar, head of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, expressed concern about the growing opposition. He told the newspaper: “Three years on, the people are still hoping that things are going to work out, but they have become suspicious about why the Americans came, and why the Americans are treating the local people badly.”

This rising anti-US sentiment is being expressed in increasing attacks on US and allied forces. In April, Lieutenant General David Barno, former US military commander in Afghanistan, dismissed the armed opposition as a “small hardcore remnant of the Taliban”. Since then, however, fighting has intensified dramatically. The US military has suffered more 45 deaths in the last three months and claims to have killed more than 450 “enemy” fighters.

The air attack on the village of Chechal demonstrates that the Pentagon is responding to the military challenge in Afghanistan, in the same way that it has in Iraq: through repression, round-ups and reprisals aimed at terrorising the Afghan population into submission.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact