

Afghans besiege US base to protest arrests

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Nearly 2,000 Afghans protested Tuesday outside the US air base in Bagram, north of the Afghan capital, Kabul. Chanting “Die America!” the crowd threw stones and tried to break down an outer gate to the base, demanding the release of eight detained villagers.

According to the Associated Press, Afghan troops fired warning shots and used clubs to beat back the demonstrators, and US troops also fired shots into the air. Smoke rose from tires set on fire by the protesters. There were no immediate reports of casualties.

It was the biggest anti-US protest since demonstrations erupted last May in Kabul, Jalalabad and other Afghan cities following the publication of an article in *Newsweek* magazine—later retracted—that reported the desecration of the Koran by US interrogators at the Guantánamo Bay prison camp. Sixteen people were killed and scores injured in those protests.

Following Tuesday’s protests, the US military handed over six Bagram villagers to Afghan authorities. (The US said only six had been detained late Monday, following earlier reports of eight.) The six included a former commander in the US-backed Northern Alliance, an Islamic cleric, farmers and laborers.

The US claimed the men “had materials used to make improvised explosive devices in their possession and are thought to be planning future attacks against coalition forces.” The provincial governor guaranteed the men would be presented for questioning at any time US officials requested.

Demonstrators were angered that the men had been arrested without consulting local Afghan authorities. “We should be treated with dignity,” Shah Aghar, 35, told AP. “They are arresting our people without permission of the government. They are breaking into our houses and offending the people. We are very angry.”

Protesters who had massed outside the Bagram base—the main US military headquarters in Afghanistan—threw stones as six US military vehicles tried to enter the base. Soldiers in the vehicles fired into the air with handguns. As the convoy sped into the base, the crowd chased after it, trying to push down a metal gate guarded by Afghan troops. Some of the protesters were beaten by the guards with clubs, and most dispersed.

Thousands of American and other foreign soldiers live at the Bagram base. It is ringed by several razor-wire fences and the main entrance consists of a series of heavily guarded checkpoints. Areas outside the base’s perimeter contain land mines placed during the Soviet occupation in the 1980s.

Bagram has become a symbol of the brutality that has characterized the close to four-year US occupation of Afghanistan. A May 20, 2005 *New York Times* article, based on a 2,000-page file compiled by US army investigators, confirmed that the US military has carried out systematic physical and psychological torture at the base’s detention center. This included two documented deaths of prisoners in December 2002 at the hands of US torturers. (See “Afghan president feigns outrage over latest US torture revelations”.)

According to an Afghan provincial governor, the night before the Bagram protest about 50 suspected insurgents and two Afghan soldiers died in an overnight battle in southern Afghanistan. The US would not confirm the death toll. It was one of the bloodiest clashes in the recent fighting that has erupted in Afghanistan as the country heads into parliamentary elections, scheduled for September 18.

The puppet regime of Hamid Karzai controls little of the country outside of Kabul. US forces have suffered mounting casualties in recent months, including the loss of 16 special forces troops killed in the downing of a Chinook helicopter on June 28. Afghan civilian

casualties have risen in the aftermath of the incident. A surge in violence has claimed the lives of more than 800 people since March.

Since the US invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, 214 American troops have been killed in the country. US casualties have increased with each year of the war, with 60 deaths reported in the first seven months of 2005 alone.



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