

NATO forces carry out massacre of Afghan civilians

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Official estimates of the civilian death toll from NATO air strikes in southern Afghanistan on October 24 are disputed, but some sources report up to 85 killed.

NATO planes carried out bombing raids in the Panjwayi district near Kandahar. Scores of people were killed in the village of Nangawat, some in their own homes while celebrating the Eid al-Fitr festival that marks the end of Ramadan. Many of the dead were women and children.

The bombed district is in the region where NATO forces carried out Operation Medusa in September. This was a “significant success,” according to a senior NATO commander, in which upwards of 500 Taliban fighters were killed. NATO officials claimed to have completely flushed out or killed all Taliban militants in the area.

Reports also suggest at least 40 civilians died during the recent bombing raids when a nomad camp was hit in the district. NATO command has conceded only 12 civilians deaths in the recent air strikes, adding that 48 Taliban fighters were killed in the area. The Taliban has denied losing any men.

Local police and officials have rejected NATO accounts. Afghan Interior Ministry spokesman Zmarai Bashir told the BBC that 40 civilians and 20 Taliban militants were killed, while another government official, who asked not to be named because “it would cause me problems,” said at least 60 had died. Kandahar provincial council member Bismallah Afghanmal told the Associated Press that up to 85 civilians had been killed. Other local officials put the death toll at between 60 and 85.

Residents in Panjwayi say the bombing continued into the night. Local people as well as district officials have described buildings destroyed by aerial bombings.

One local man said, “The planes came and were bombing from 3 a.m. And in the morning they started hitting our village with mortars and rockets. They didn’t allow anybody to come to our help.”

Witnesses told Reuters that 25 homes were demolished during four to five hours of bombing. People told the BBC that the bodies of many locals had been pulled from the rubble of their homes and buried.

One of the surviving nomads, who are among the poorest of Afghanistan’s citizens, said 20 members of his family had been killed and 10 injured. He said their camp, with no connection to the Taliban, had been attacked: “There are no Taliban here. We live outside the village in an open area in tents. Anyone can come here to see our homes and area. There are no Taliban here. We all are nomads living in tents.

“Each time they say that it was a mistake. They have destroyed us all in such mistakes. For God’s sake, come and see our situation.”

This was echoed by Kandahar provincial councilor Afghanmal, who said, “These kinds of things have happened several times, and they only say, ‘Sorry.’ How can you compensate people who have lost their sons and daughters? The government and the coalition told families that there was no Taliban in the area anymore. If there are no Taliban, then why are they bombing the area?”

Major Luke Knitig, a spokesman for NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), said NATO troops had been engaged in heavy fighting against insurgents in three separate incidents in Panjwayi that day and the battle included air strikes.

Hundreds attended a mass funeral for the dead villagers two days after the NATO bombing raids. Many of the mourners condemned both NATO and the Karzai government for the deaths.

One mourner, Abdul Aye, who claimed 22 members of his family were killed in the NATO raids, said, "Everyone is very angry at the government and the coalition. There was no Taliban."

Taj Mohammad, another villager, said there were no militants and innocent people were killed. Mohammad said 10 of his relatives had been killed in the latest incident.

A NATO officer later said the wild variance in the death toll estimates may stem from insurgents "being misidentified as innocent bystanders." The unnamed officer stressed that NATO bombs did not go off course.

The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan said it was "very concerned."

The latest atrocity against Afghan civilians follows the killing of at least 26 people less than a week before in NATO operations in Kandahar and neighbouring Helmand province.

President Hamid Karzai announced an inquiry by a body to include NATO officers along with a few tribal and community elders. Karzai's office said his investigators would make suggestions on how to prevent such "unfortunate" incidents in future and ensure "better coordination with foreign forces." The inquiry is to report in a week's time.

At a press conference he did not attempt to give a figure of those killed, speaking only of "numbers" of civilian deaths. But he did admit that foreign pilots did not always manage to distinguish between Taliban fighters and civilians.

To shore up the pretense of a sovereign government in Kabul, the press conference was closely followed by a statement from NATO spokesman Mark Laity, who said, "We've got tight rules of engagement but sometimes things go wrong.... President Karzai quite understandably and correctly wants us to show maximum care. That's what we do."

The prostration of Karzai before the United States is being exploited by Islamist militias. An alleged statement by the Taliban leadership dismissed Karzai's offer for talks on October 27 and called his administration a "puppet government."

"We say even today that there is no possibility of any talks when the country is under occupation," the statement said. "Any talks with aggressors would amount to selling the country."

Karzai had reiterated to reporters that he was ready to negotiate with the fugitive Taliban leader Mullah Omar if he stopped receiving support from neighboring Pakistan. Karzai says Omar is hiding in the Pakistani city of Quetta, while Pakistan says Omar is in Afghanistan.

Over the past two years hundreds of Taliban supporters, including some senior officials, are believed to have reconciled with the government, but there have apparently been no high-level talks with the Islamist group's leadership.

NATO forces have relied extensively on attack aircraft in Afghanistan in the past year. According to the New York-based Human Rights Watch, in June the US Central Command confirmed 340 air strikes in Afghanistan, double the 160 strikes in Iraq in the same month.



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