

UK troops rampage through Kandahar

Harvey Thompson
19 December 2006

An official investigation was launched December 9 into allegations that British troops had opened fire indiscriminately at civilians in Kandahar city, southern Afghanistan, following a suicide car bomb attack on a NATO-led convoy.

At around 11: 00 a.m. on December 3, a suicide bomber attempted to ram his car into a 20-vehicle military convoy as it passed through Kandahar city on route to Camp Bastion in Helmand. Three Afghan labourers were killed and three British soldiers suffered life-threatening injuries. The convoy security detail moved the wounded into two vehicles and started towards an evacuation point. Seconds later gunfire erupted.

According to the *Guardian* newspaper, Abdul Wali, 26, a baker, was cowering inside his shop when he heard the first bullets. Stepping into the street, he saw a taxi driver with apparent bullet wounds being pulled from his car. "The British were shooting and shouting 'Go! Go! Go!'" he said. "They were scared and they were taking their revenge."

As the convoy approached the city centre, near the busy Martyrs Square junction, Abdul Rahim stopped his motorcycle to let it pass. More gunfire rang out, sparking panic. Bystanders ran into nearby shops for cover, he said. Abdul Rahim tried to push his motorcycle back but it was too late. He was shot twice; the first bullet passed through his upper back, and the second pierced his side and lodged near his spinal cord. Speaking later from his bed at Kandahar hospital, he said; "The British say they came to bring peace to our country. What kind of peace is this?"

Noor Khan, a reporter for Associated Press who was sitting in his car nearby, feared he would also be shot. "They aimed their guns straight at me. I immediately raised my hands," he said.

Isah Mohammad, one of the Afghans injured by gunfire, said from his hospital bed that he was driving

through Kandahar with his cousin when the convoy passed them. "The convoy was coming and there was some gunfire, but I thought it was a wedding ceremony," said Mohammad, who was hit in the shoulder and the right leg. "When they got closer, they started shooting at us."

His uncle, Gahfoor Aqa, said of the NATO troops, "They are always saying they're coming to rebuild our country. But instead they are shooting our children."

The convoy pushed towards the Helmand road. But as it left the city the British soldiers allegedly opened fire again, more than five miles from the suicide attack site, on a taxi carrying three men.

From Kandahar hospital the third man in the car, Dost Muhammad, said, "Our driver reduced his speed and tried to stop on the side of the road. The British passed by very close and started firing."

The Kandahar incident was one of at least five violent confrontations reported in southern Afghanistan in the previous 24 hours. More than 12 people were killed and 11 wounded in clashes elsewhere.

Suicide bombings have become an almost daily occurrence in the violence across southern Afghanistan; the December 3 bombing was the fourth suicide attack in a week in the Kandahar region alone (two Canadian soldiers were killed the previous week by a suicide car bomb just outside Kandahar). BBC correspondents report that there are now so many attacks in Kandahar it is nicknamed "bomb city" by many Afghans.

According to NATO, since January 1, 2006, at least 230 Afghans and 17 foreign troops have been killed by suicide bombers, while hundreds more have been maimed. The bombs have mainly been in the south and east of the country and typically target NATO and Afghan security forces, but more often kill and injure civilians.

The events in Kandahar have sparked widespread public anger in the city, where recent suicide bombs

have frayed nerves and created extreme animosity towards NATO forces. Mourners at funerals for those killed spoke of a jihad against British soldiers. “The foreigners should leave,” declared Fida Muhammad. “Some say they are our enemy. I agree.”

Squadron Leader Jason Chalk, a spokesman for NATO regional command in Kandahar, promised a thorough investigation by Royal Military police. But a simultaneous statement was released by Lieutenant Colonel Andy Price, spokesman for the UK taskforce in Helmand, saying that troops acted within their rules of engagement. “I can categorically state that we did not indiscriminately open fire,” he said.

Price said, “It’s very regrettable that civilians got hurt. But the Taliban detonated a bomb that killed innocent people on a busy street. That is not our fault,” he said.

The increasingly provocative conduct of NATO forces in Afghanistan is creating major problems for the client regime of Hamid Karzai. In a heavily body-guarded visit to Kandahar city on December 12, the president warned both NATO and Pakistan of the possible consequences of the spiralling violence.

Describing himself as a “man of unbelievable deadly resolve,” Karzai warned that “the whole region will run into hell with us” if the insurgency was not quelled. “It’s not going to be like the past where only we suffer. Those who cause us to suffer will burn in hell with us. And I hope NATO recognises this,” he said.

Karzai renewed his attacks on Pakistan’s failure to stop cross-border attacks and suggested that they have official sanction. “The problem is not with the Taliban,” he said. “The problem is with Pakistan.”

The Washington-installed president also faced a barrage of accusations of civilian deaths at the hands of British troops. Referring directly to events in Kandahar on December 3, Karzai said he was “worried and rightly angered” by the incident. “You cannot go and shoot into people fearing another suicide attack. You have to take other measures,” he said.

As Karzai was speaking, a civilian on a motorbike was shot dead as he approached an ISAF checkpoint in the city.

Observers have commented that Karzai is showing the signs of a man fighting for his political life. Just days before his visit to Kandahar, he apparently began crying during a speech in which he was describing his

“helplessness” in the face of Afghan casualties from NATO air strikes.



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