

Highway massacre sparks anti-US protests in Afghanistan

Bill Van Auken
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The slaughter of some 16 civilians and the wounding of at least two dozen more by US troops in Afghanistan Sunday sparked angry protests demanding a withdrawal of the occupation forces and the ouster of Washington's puppet, President Hamid Karzai.

The killings took place on a main highway between the Afghan town of Jalalabad and the Pakistani border after a suicide bomber detonated a car loaded with explosives near a convoy of US Marines.

Both eyewitnesses to the incident and some Afghan officials described the US troops firing indiscriminately at civilians in their vehicles and on foot in angry retaliation for the suicide attack.

A military spokesman claimed that the civilians were "caught in the crossfire," and that the car bomb was part of a "complex ambush involving enemy small arms fire from several directions."

Responding according to the occupation force's standard script, the spokesman, Lt. Col. David Accetta, issued a cynical statement declaring that "the terrorists demonstrated their blatant disregard for human life by attacking coalition forces in a populated area, knowing full well that innocent Afghans would be killed and wounded."

Witnesses, however, said that the only fire came from the American troops. Doctors who treated the wounded said that all of wounds were caused by bullets and none by shrapnel from the bomb blast.

"They were firing everywhere, and even opened fire on 14 to 15 vehicles passing on the highway," Tur Gul, who was shot twice in the hand as he stood at a gas station near the scene of the incident, told the Associated Press. "They opened fire on everybody, the ones inside the vehicles and the ones on foot."

Fifteen-year-old Mohammad Ishaq, who was also shot twice during the barrage, added, "When we parked

our vehicle, when they passed us, they opened fire on our vehicle. It was a convoy of three American Humvees. All three Humvees were firing around."

Ahmed Najib, 23, was wounded together with his two-year-old brother. "One American was in the first vehicle, shouting to stop on the side of the road, and we stopped," he said. "The first vehicle did not fire on us, but the second opened fire on our car. I saw them turning and firing in this direction, then turning and firing in that direction. I even saw a farmer shot by the Americans."

Another man told the Al Jazeera news agency that five members of his family had been killed in the shooting. "American bullets murdered my family," he said. "It's tyranny and injustice."

The district chief of Shinwar, Mohammad Khan Katawazi, told the news agency that the US Marines appeared to treat everyone on the highway, including both those in cars and on foot, as insurgents.

The province's police chief, Abdul Nangahar, added, "When local people came to the scene, the soldiers opened fire on the crowd. People got killed and wounded."

In an attempt to cover up the massacre, the American troops confiscated cameras from photographers and deleted images of the atrocity. The Associated Press reported that one of its freelance photographers and a cameraman for AP Television News both were threatened with violence and had their cameras seized after they arrived on the scene and filmed the images of dead civilians in their automobiles.

The killings sparked mass protests, with thousands of Afghans coming to the scene of the carnage and blocking the highway, which is the main route from the capital of Kabul to the Pakistan border. The protesters threw rocks at riot police and chanted, "Death to

America. Death to Karzai.”

The horrific incident was all too typical of a besieged and failing occupation in which US and NATO troops view the population at large as hostile and see a potential attacker in virtually every civilian they encounter. On December 3, British soldiers opened fire indiscriminately as they sped away from another suicide bomb attack in Kandahar. The gunfire left one civilian dead and at least six others wounded. And, in May 2006, US troops opened fire on a crowd of Afghans after an accident in which a US military truck slammed into cars caught in a traffic jam. At least four civilians were killed and many more wounded. That incident touched off mass rioting that claimed at least 20 more lives.

Instability and violence has only deepened as the Bush administration and its principal ally, Britain, have conducted another military “surge” in Afghanistan in an attempt to hold back a mounting offensive by forces linked to the ex-Taliban regime ousted by the US invasion of 2001.

The attack on the US Marine convoy was the second such suicide car-bombing in less than a week. Last Tuesday, another suicide bomber killed at least 23 people in an attack outside the main US base at Bagram during a visit by US Vice President Dick Cheney to the facility. Cheney was rushed to a secure bomb shelter after the attack. While the bulk of the attack’s victims were Afghan, two Americans and a South Korean were also killed in the bombing.

Meanwhile, two British soldiers were killed in a rocket attack in Helmand province on Saturday.

The latest casualties were reported as the US and allies are bracing for what is anticipated to be a spring offensive by Afghan resistance fighters.

There are unmistakable indications of mounting resistance to the US-led occupation. While only 24 suicide bombings were recorded in 2005, the number shot up to 139 such attacks last year. During the same period, as President Bush himself spelled out in a February 15 speech, “the number of roadside bomb attacks almost doubled, direct fire attacks on international forces almost tripled.”

This threat has been cited as the justification for intensified repression by the occupation forces. US Defense Secretary Robert Gates declared recently that US-led forces would launch their own escalation rather

than waiting for the insurgents to attack.

“What we want to do this spring is have this spring offensive be our offensive,” Gates said.

But the stepped up military operations, combined with brazen acts of angry and panicked retaliation like the one witnessed on Sunday are only intensifying the hostility of the Afghan population to the foreign occupiers.

A study released last week by the US think tank, the Jamestown Foundation, warned: “As coalition troops continue to use close air support and superior artillery firepower to flush Taliban insurgents out of provinces like Kandahar, the real contest for the hearts and minds ... may well hinge on the competing sides’ ‘collateral damage’ statistics.”

Some 27,000 US troops are presently deployed in Afghanistan, making up over half of the 35,000-strong NATO force, together with 10,000 more operating under a separate US command. The Bush administration recently boosted occupation forces by delaying the scheduled withdrawal of nearly 3,500 American soldiers.

The new Democratic leadership in Congress, meanwhile, has fully embraced the strategy of increased military repression in Afghanistan, accusing the Bush administration of failing to deploy adequate forces in the country. Both Senator Hillary Clinton, one of the front-runners for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, and Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic Speaker of the House, have visited Afghanistan within the past month to signal their support for an escalation of Washington’s militarist adventure in the country.



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