

US massacres of civilians spark protests in Afghanistan

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Bombing raids by US-led NATO forces in western Afghanistan last week killed at least 50 civilians and perhaps over 100, reports from Afghan government officials and human rights organizations have confirmed.

The aerial bombings took place on April 28 and 29 in the Shindand District of the western province of Herat. According to a statement by the US military, 136 “Taliban fighters” were killed in two separate bombing raids, but this claim provoked immediate anger and skepticism on the part of local residents, who insist that there are no Taliban in the region. Earlier this week, thousands gathered to protest the killings and denounce the US-backed government of Hamid Karzai. At least 20 were wounded when Afghan police opened fire on the demonstrators.

In recent days, reports have emerged from the province itself about the nature of the bombings. Ghalum Nabi Hakak, the Herat representative of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, told the *Washington Post* on Wednesday night, “So far the people have buried 45 bodies, and they are still taking out more. Yesterday they buried 12 children,” he said. “The exact number of dead is not clear, but the people are very angry.”

Those who visited the area said that by mid-week villagers were still attempting to dig out bodies from collapsed mud houses destroyed in the NATO raids on two villages.

Reports differ on the number of people killed and displaced by the bombings. One resident said that more than 100 people had been killed, and all were civilians. Many more were injured. Adrian Edwards, spokesman for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, said a separate investigation found 49 civilians killed and over 900 families displaced.

Farzana Ahmadi, a spokeswoman for the governor of Herat, said that 100 houses were destroyed and 1,600 people rendered homeless.

Ahmadi said that a report prepared by local officials concluded that “some women and children were drowned in the river, and it was maybe in the heat of the moment that the children and people wanted to escape and jumped into the water.”

While the exact nature of the events leading up to the bombings is unclear, it is known that US special forces were in the area conducting operations. The US military claims that these forces met some resistance, but there is no independent confirmation of these claims. NATO air support was called in, and the villages were bombed.

In response to this latest massacre, NATO military and Bush administration spokesmen repeated the same rationales given for every atrocity. General Dan McNeill, commander of NATO’s International Security Assistance Forces, declared that “only firing insurgents were targeted.”

White House spokesman Tony Snow tried to pin the blame for the deaths on Afghans, saying on Thursday that the Taliban was “deliberately placing [civilians] in harm’s way.”

The nature of US operations in the western region of Afghanistan, which borders Iran, is unknown. Most military actions in the past have concentrated on the south, near the border with Pakistan, where the Taliban has the most support. Local residents insist that there are no members of the Taliban in the area. It is possible that the US is seeking to establish a firmer grip on western Afghanistan in preparation for any planned operations against Iran.

The killings in western Afghanistan took place amid a broader “spring offensive” by US and NATO forces

that has led to the deaths of scores of people throughout the country. On Friday, Janan Gulzai, a provincial assembly member, said that at least 13 civilians were killed in a NATO bombing raid in southern Afghanistan on Tuesday night. Gulzai told Reuters, “I saw all the victims are civilians.”

These civilians were apparently killed in a similar manner as those in Herat province. NATO warplanes were summoned after ground forces came under fire. The planes bombed the area indiscriminately, destroying three automobiles containing the 13 people killed.

An ongoing British-led NATO offensive in the south this week has killed at least 75, all described by the NATO forces as “Taliban.”

These incidents follow two separate killing sprees by US forces near the eastern city of Jalalabad. Six were killed during a raid on April 29, including one woman and one child. In March, US marines went on a rampage in the same area that left 12 civilians dead and 35 more injured.

It is difficult to derive any objective measure of the toll on the Afghan population from operations by US and NATO forces in recent months. Media coverage of events outside of the capital of Kabul is based largely on statements by US and NATO military commanders. An AP account found that 151 civilians have been killed this year, including 51 blamed on US and NATO forces (not including the recent reports from Herat). However this tally is based on figures provided by NATO and the Karzai government, and both have an obvious interest in underreporting civilian casualties.

Mounting civilian casualties have, however, led to a sharp increase in popular opposition to the occupation and the Karzai government.

The most recent killings in Jalalabad have led to several days of protests involving thousands of people, including many Afghan students. The AFP quoted one student attending a protest on Wednesday asking, “Why are they [Karzai and Bush] not accounting for the blood of innocent people who are being killed by the Americans on our soil?” Another declared, “The Americans have invaded our country. They have made themselves the owners and us their slaves.”

Opposition to the government is growing, and is not confined to supporters of the Taliban. Demonstrations over the past week, including protests by hundreds of

people on Friday, have clearly shaken the unstable puppet regime in Kabul, prompting Karzai to issue statements denouncing the civilian deaths. One of the principal demands of the protests has been for Karzai’s resignation.

Karzai insisted on Wednesday that his government can “no longer accept” civilian casualties. “The intention may be very good to fight terrorism, sometimes mistakes are made, but five years on, it is very difficult for us to continue to accept civilian casualties,” he said. “It’s not understandable anymore.” Karzai warned of “serious consequences for all” if the violence against civilians is not curtailed. Certainly he counts himself among those who might face these serious consequences.

In comments to the AFP, veteran Afghan journalist and commentator Ikhpolwak Safi noted, “When civilians die—obviously not for good reason—and it is linked to [Karzai’s] government, it will turn people against him. Dropping bombs on villages because one individual attacked them is not a wise thing to do. This is what the foreign troops have been doing.”



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