

Afghanistan: 40 civilians killed in US strike

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At least 40 Afghan civilians were killed in air strikes on Tuesday, adding to the mounting death toll from the escalation of US operations in the country. The latest incident occurred in the Sangin district of the southern province of Helmand, the scene of stepped-up US and NATO attacks in recent months.

Earlier reports put the civilian death toll at 21, according to the governor of Helmand, Assadullah Wafa. Reuters reported the larger figure on Thursday, citing eyewitness accounts.

As usual, the US initially claimed that all of those killed were Taliban fighters. This latest incident, however, appears to have followed a pattern repeated in other areas recently. According to military spokesman, US forces came under attack while patrolling in the area, and one US soldier died in the fighting. The embattled patrol responded by calling in air support, which carried out indiscriminate bombing raids, including on local villages.

Major William Mitchell, a spokesman for the US-led coalition troops in Afghanistan, claimed Wednesday, “We don’t have any report of civilian casualties.” Sergeant Dean Welch, a US spokesman at the Bagram Air Force base, acknowledged there were such reports, but said they were not “confirmed.”

A report in the *Toronto Globe and Mail* on Thursday refutes these claims, however, noting that after the incident local villagers brought their wounded and dead to a nearby military base to protest the killings.

“A grim tally emerged as angry villagers brought their injured and dead to Forward Operating Base Robinson, an outpost shared by Canadian, British, and US troops,” *Globe and Mail* reporter Graeme Smith reported from Sangin District. “There were seven women, three men and two children among the dead; five women, five men and 15 children were injured.”

The newspaper interviewed one of the survivors, a 13-year-old boy named Rahmatullah. In addition to a

wounded uncle, four of his other relatives were killed, he said, but he dragged two of his brothers alive from the mud rubble of a house. “The people who bombed us are bad guys,” Rahmatullah said. “They should attack the Taliban, not us.” The villagers who were killed belonged to tribes generally considered hostile to the Taliban.

Some residents rejected statements by Governor Wafa and the US military that there were Taliban in the area, and that they hid in civilian homes to use the civilians as shields. “There were no Taliban in our area,” one resident of Sangin told Reuters by phone.

The recent killings are part of a broader US-led offensive to recapture parts of the country not under the control of the puppet regime of Hamid Karzai in Kabul. In January, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, with the support of both the Democrats and Republicans in the US, announced an increase in the US-military presence to prepare for a “spring offensive.”

On Wednesday, the military announced that about 4,500 troops from the 101st Airborne Division would be sent to Afghanistan to maintain the current troop strength at least through 2008. There are currently about 25,000 US troops in Afghanistan, including two combat brigades, in addition to troops from Britain, Poland and other countries.

The deaths Tuesday come on the heels of several other attacks that have killed scores of civilians. At the end of April, air strikes in the western Herat Province killed at least 50, while other attacks in the south have killed dozens, including one incident, also at the end of April, in which 13 civilians were killed.

Near Jalalabad in the east, 6 Afghans were killed during a raid in April, while 19 civilians were killed and 50 wounded when US marines went on a killing spree in March.

All of these incidents are combining to sharply increase popular opposition to the presence of foreign

troops in Afghanistan. Each of the killings has been followed by large protests, sometimes lasting for days, demanding the withdrawal of US and other military forces.

Growing concern within the Afghan government that popular opposition could undermine the Karzai government was on display Tuesday, when the upper house of the parliament voted for a military cease-fire and negotiations with the Taliban.

Meanwhile, a US Army brigade commander issued a cynical apology for the deaths of the 19 civilians near Jalalabad in March. Colonel John Nicholson said he was “deeply, deeply ashamed” by the incident, and said the military was issuing payments of US\$2,000 as “essentially a symbol of our sympathy to them” and “a way of expressing our genuine condolences over the incident occurring.”

Haji Lawania, who was injured and had two relatives killed by the Marines, expressed what was no doubt the reaction of many of those involved, saying, “We don’t want their money and apologies. If somebody loses one of his family members, an apology won’t bring him back.”



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