

US missile strike kills seven children in Afghanistan

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US-led coalition forces bombed a compound containing a mosque and a religious school in eastern Afghanistan on Sunday, killing seven children aged 10 to 16.

The US military told reporters that the compound, located in the Zarghun Shah district of the border province Paktika, was being used as a base for Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters.

Employing the standard justification used by the US government when it kills innocent civilians, military spokesman Major Chris Belcher said in an official statement, “this is another example of Al Qaeda using the protective status of a mosque, as well as innocent civilians, to shield themselves.”

He went on, “We are saddened by the innocent lives that were lost as a result of militants’ cowardice. We had surveillance on the compound all day and had no indication that there were children inside the building.” Belcher did not account for the fact that human shields would only be useful to the extent that the US military knew they were present, since this would be the only way to prevent an attack.

Although the operation was backed by Afghan troops, Akram Akhpelwak, governor of Paktika Province, said that he was not made aware of the bombing beforehand.

The attacks sparked renewed demonstrations calling for the withdrawal of US troops, as well as for the resignation of Afghan president Hamid Karzai, who is discredited in the eyes of the population by his association with the US occupation.

The latest round of civilian casualties is not unique, and the past month has seen a string of incidents in which US troops have bombed Afghan homes. The US is in the midst of an offensive intended to regain control over parts of the country.

Two separate incidents in April and May killed nearly

100 civilians. Al Jazeera has reported that more than 120 civilians have been killed by foreign forces in Afghanistan in recent months. Mass demonstrations in opposition to the US occupation and the Karzai government have also become more frequent.

The reaction of the American military to the most recent incident is an indication of the nervousness US officials feel over growing opposition. In past instances where civilians were killed, the US only reacted after reports of civilian deaths leaked out from other sources. This time, however, the military itself reported the deaths, evidently in an attempt to preempt popular anger.

A central area of the renewed US offensive is in southern Afghanistan, where between one and two hundred people have been killed over the last three days amidst a NATO-led campaign, according to Afghan officials. An Associated Press article on Monday reported that the Taliban has launched an offensive against police posts in the Uruzgan province.

Mullah Ahmidullah Khan, the head of the provisional council in Uruzgan, told the Associated Press that the fighting in the Chora District had killed approximately 60 civilians, 70 “suspected Taliban militants” and 16 Afghan Police.

A resident of Qala-i-Ragham told the AP, “Eight bombs fell in my village. On Sunday my relatives buried 18 members of my family, including women and children. More than 15 other members of my family are wounded, 10 of whom are women.”

According to Al Jazeera, more than 6,000 people have been killed in Afghanistan over the past 17 months, with about 1,500 of them being civilians. The upsurge of violence has caused thousands of people to flee to neighboring Iran and Pakistan.

A NATO spokeswoman told the AP that there is

“definitely a large engagement that has been going on” in southern Afghanistan over the last three days.

There has been an escalation of violence around the country. Suicide attacks, which were relatively rare in Afghanistan two years ago, have become increasingly common. US officials noted that recent bombings have become more effective, and that Afghan militants have begun using tactics similar to those used in Iraq.

On Sunday, a suicide bombing in Kabul killed some 24 people and left many others wounded. According to Interior Minister Zarar Ahmad Muqhal, the bomber boarded a bus carrying Afghan police instructors before detonating his explosives. Twenty-two of the blast’s 24 casualties were police instructors on their way to work, leading Karzai to characterize the attack as an attempt to disrupt the growth of the US-backed Afghan police force.

The attack was the fifth suicide bombing in three days, and formed part of a large escalation of violence around the country. It was also the fourth, and most deadly, attack on a bus carrying Afghan police or soldiers during the past year.

The US military claimed the bombing was the work of the Taliban, and a self-described Taliban spokesman called an Associated Press journalist Sunday claiming that the blast was perpetrated by one Mullah Asim Abul.

On June 16, a suicide bomber driving a taxi set off his explosives near a convoy of US civilian contractors and soldiers, killing four people standing nearby and wounding one of the soldiers. Within hours, American soldiers fired into a crowd of bystanders, wounding one person and killing another in what a US military spokesman, Lt. Col. David Accetta, called an “unfortunate accident” resulting from “the accidental discharge of a weapon.”



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