

At least 25 Afghan civilians killed in US bomb attack

Barry Grey
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At least 25 civilians were killed in a US air strike early Friday morning in the southern Afghan province of Helmand. The dead included nine women, three babies and an elderly mullah in the village of Kunjakak in the Grishk district of Helmand, according to the provincial police chief.

The civilian deaths added to the mounting toll of innocent Afghans killed by US-led forces in the course of an offensive against resurgent Taliban guerillas, concentrated in the south of the country but including other areas as well. Friday's air strike was launched in response to an attack on police posts in the Grishk district, which the US attributed to the Taliban.

On June 18, seven children were killed when a US warplane bombed a religious compound containing a mosque and a school in the Zarghun Shah district of the border province of Paktika, in eastern Afghanistan. Also this week, an Afghan official in Uruzgan province, Mullah Ahmidullah Khan, told the Associated Press that fighting in the Chora District had killed approximately 60 civilians, 70 "suspected Taliban militants" and 16 Afghan police.

In two separate incidents in April and May, nearly 100 civilians were killed by US-led forces.

At the time of the June 18 bombing, *Al Jazeera* reported that more than 120 civilians had been killed by foreign forces in Afghanistan in recent months. The wanton destruction of life by the US-led occupation forces has sparked mass demonstrations against the US and NATO as well as Washington's puppet government, headed by President Hamid Karzai.

Karzai, increasingly isolated in his Kabul compound and despised by his countrymen, felt obliged to issue a statement of protest against the rising civilian toll from foreign troop operations. "This is suffering that increasingly is becoming difficult for us to accept or

understand," he told the BBC.

However, American and NATO military officials responded to Friday's slaughter with the now-standard attempt to blame the deaths on Taliban fighters, accusing them of using civilians as human shields.

NATO spokesman Lt. Col. Mike Smith issued a written statement saying that perhaps 30 Taliban insurgents were killed in the air strike, adding that while an unknown number of innocents may have died, the Taliban had chosen the location for its attacks and "the risk to civilians was probably deliberate." He continued, "It is this irresponsible action that may have led to the casualties."

NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer adopted the same posture. In Quebec City, Canada to attend ceremonies for soldiers bound for Afghanistan, he declared, "If these things happen, they are mistakes. It's never intentional. It can happen because our enemies use children and civilians as human shields."

Aside from their self-serving and cynical character, there is a basic contradiction in these claims that none of the officials making them addresses. Human shields would be useful for warding off attacks only to the extent that the US military knew they were present.

In fact, the US and NATO are carrying out a brutal offensive to intimidate and crush all opposition to foreign occupation and the US-backed regime in Kabul, with callous indifference to civilian lives.

The British ambassador to Kabul, Sir Sherard Coward-Coles, told the BBC Wednesday that "the Taliban are responsible for five times as many civilian casualties as the coalition forces." However, the Associated Press calculates the number of civilians killed in NATO or US military operations so far this year to be 177, undoubtedly a serious underestimation, while it reports the number of civilians killed in insurgent attacks,

including a recent spate of suicide bombings, to be 169.

Earlier this week, ACBAR, a coalition of Afghan and international relief agencies such as CARE, Save the Children, and Mercy Corps, criticized the US and its allies, saying their military actions have led to a minimum of 230 civilian deaths so far this year. The organization pointed not only to air strikes, but also 14 instances in which civilians were “killed for simply driving or walking too closely” to foreign soldiers. It also criticized “abusive raids and searches of Afghan homes.”

NATO Secretary General Scheffer has been meeting with Canadian officials to secure the country’s commitment, in the face of massive popular opposition, to the fighting in Afghanistan beyond Canada’s self-imposed deadline of February 2009. A survey released this week suggested that 70 percent of Quebec citizens are opposed to the 2,000 troops from the Canadian Forces Base near Quebec City being deployed to Afghanistan.

But Prime Minister Stephen Harper said Friday he would seek an all-party agreement in the House of Commons to extend the deployment of troops beyond the deadline.



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