

US airstrike leaves over 100 dead in Afghanistan

Tom Carter
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Late in the day on June 29, more than a hundred people were killed in a massive US-led airstrike on the village of Hyderabad, located in the Grishk district of the southern province of Helmand in Afghanistan. According to Dur Ali Shah, the mayor of the district, at least 107 people were killed in the attack, which can only be described as a massacre.

Shah claimed that of the dead, 62 were insurgents and 45 were civilians. Because Hyderabad is embattled and remote, there have been no other reports from the scene to corroborate these claims, which if true would describe the most deadly single military attack since 2002. The number of people who were injured in the attack is also unknown.

The few details that have emerged point to a chilling but increasingly familiar scenario of collective punishment employed against a population hostile to foreign occupation.

On June 29, a patrol convoy involving US and Afghan national forces was ambushed by insurgents armed with mortars, rockets and small arms, according to Major John Thomas, a spokesman for the NATO forces in Afghanistan.

Following a brief engagement, according to Thomas, the ambushing forces conducted a retreat, eventually reaching the village of Hyderabad, where they took up defensive positions anticipating a US counterattack. NATO surveillance aircraft observed the retreat from a safe distance.

That evening, unidentified US aircraft suddenly and without warning pummeled the entire village with heavy ordnance, blasting businesses, residences, livestock, insurgents and villagers indiscriminately.

The Associated Press spoke with shaken Hyderabad resident Mohammad Khan by telephone, who described a “lot of dead bodies” awaiting burial in the aftermath

of the attack. “I brought three of my wounded relatives to Grishk hospital for treatment,” he said. Among the dead were Khan’s brother and five of his brother’s children.

Spokesmen for the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) responded to international outrage over the massacre with predictable phrases, blaming insurgents for causing civilian deaths by taking refuge behind “human shields.”

“It’s the enemy fighters who willingly fire when civilians are right next to them,” Thomas said. Without providing substantiation, he claimed that the number of civilians killed was “a dozen or less.”

The US-installed Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, felt compelled to issue a statement denouncing the attack for its “extreme and disproportionate use of force and lack of coordination with the Afghan government.” He also criticized the indifference of US commanders to the lives of Afghan civilians.

NATO spokesman Chris Belcher acknowledged that “some people who apparently were civilians were found among insurgent fighters who were killed in firing positions in a trench line.” He added the standard phrase, “We are deeply saddened by any loss of innocent lives.”

The scale of the atrocity at Hyderabad strongly points to a deliberate policy of collective punishment, which has a long and infamous history in the imperialist occupations of the 20th century, from the fascist occupation of Europe during the Second World War, to the British counterinsurgencies in Africa and Southeast Asia, to the American Operation Phoenix in Vietnam.

Collective punishment is proscribed by the Fourth Geneva Convention.

The US and NATO forces, now in the sixth year of the occupation of Afghanistan, confront a deteriorating

military and political situation. Attacks on occupation forces, even in areas previously considered safe and loyal to the US-installed government, are on the rise as part of an insurgent “spring offensive,” accompanied by a surge in suicide bombings.

Ninety-four coalition soldiers, including 46 Americans, have been killed so far this year. Two days after the Hyderabad massacre, a suicide bomber attacked British forces in Grishk, killing one soldier and wounding several others.

Occupation authorities have reacted to the increasingly desperate situation by stepping up reprisal-type airstrikes intended to terrorize and intimidate the population.

On June 22, also in the Grishk district of Helmand province, US warplanes massacred 25 civilians in the town of Kunjakak in response to an attack on a police post. On June 18, US aircraft targeted a religious compound in Paktika, killing seven children, in the course of fighting in the border region.

The US military reported mounting 1,032 airstrikes in Afghanistan in the first five months of 2007. Over the same period, 266 were carried out in Iraq.

According to the Associated Press, around 2,800 Afghans have been killed in the first half of 2007, compared with 4,000 in all of 2006. These figures, assembled from official Afghan government records, undoubtedly represent a significant underestimation of the scale of the violence.



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