

# UN report into worst Afghan atrocity implicates security forces

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An internal United Nations (UN) report into the November 6 bombing in Baghlan, in northern Afghanistan, has revealed how the actions of security guards after the blast greatly increased the death toll.

The attack was the deadliest since the occupation of Afghanistan by US-led forces began in November 2001 and one of the bloodiest in the country's history.

Although the UN mission in Afghanistan said its leaked report was not complete and had not been officially endorsed, the document made clear that many people reported dead in the blast were actually shot dead by security guards after the explosion.

A copy of the report by the UN Department of Safety and Security was obtained by the Associated Press (AP) news agency.

The document said it was unclear how many of the 77 (61 of whom were children) who died were killed by the bomb and how many by shooting afterwards. But according to AP, the report did say, "However, latest reports suggest that gunshots could account for as many as two-thirds of all casualties.

"Regardless of what the exact breakdown of numbers may be, the fact remains that a number of armed men deliberately and indiscriminately fired into a crowd of unarmed civilians that posed no threat to them, causing multiple deaths and injuries.

"It is believed that at least 100 rounds or more were fired into the crowd with a separate group of schoolchildren off to one side of the road bearing the brunt of the onslaught at close range."

The report is part of the UN's routine weekly security assessment, and is not a separate investigation into the events in Baghlan.

Afghan authorities said that a suicide bomber carried out the November 6 attack with a bomb packed with ball bearings. The explosion occurred at a sugar factory in a town in Baghlan province while a delegation of

parliamentarians was visiting. Among MPs killed was Mustafa Kazimi, a former mujahedin fighter and prominent opposition figure.

It is not clear who carried out the attack. The Taliban have denied responsibility.

The internal report also suggests there are those within the UN who fear the consequences of the Baghlan incident for the preservation of President Hamid Karzai's government and believe that legal action should be taken against the gunmen.

The gunmen were paid bodyguards for a group of around a dozen legislators from the parliament's economic committee being greeted by hundreds of children on a visit to the sugar factory.

Although some witnesses have been quoted as saying the blanket of smoke at the blast site was so thick that they couldn't see who was shooting, other witnesses have come forward to say they could see clearly enough to identify the gunmen as the bodyguards for the committee members.

Adrian Edwards, the UN's spokesman in Afghanistan, confirmed the internal report's validity, but said the findings had not been endorsed.

For their part, the Afghan authorities are keen to lay the blame entirely with the bomber. Two Afghan government investigations are already under way. This has not stopped the authorities already repeatedly asserting that most of the casualties were the result of the suicide attack.

Afghan Interior Ministry spokesman Zemer Bashary has said most of the victims were hit by ball bearings from the bomb, and not bullets.

But in relation to this, the UN report said, "It has been confirmed that eight of the teachers in charge of this group of schoolchildren suffered multiple gunshot wounds, five of which died."

The report also said that the "investigations" into the incident were "being hampered by restrictions on

witnesses and officials” and that despite several arrests, there have not yet been any reports of who is responsible.

One of the doctors who helped treat patients after the bombing said he was pressured by a government official to hide the truth about how many gunshot victims he attended to. He refused to identify the official and spoke only on condition he was not identified because of fear of reprisals.

The revelations concerning the Baghlan incident come after months of an increase in the death tolls of both Afghans and foreign troops to a higher rate than in all previous years of the occupation.

Although no body count is kept, it is clear that many thousands have died in Afghanistan this year—a significant proportion of them civilians.

The UK-based international aid agency Oxfam, which estimates Afghan civilian deaths at around 1,200 this year (considered conservative by some), said recently that half of these were caused by international and Afghan troops.

Oxfam also criticised the way aid was distributed in Afghanistan, saying that too much was provided in ways that were ineffective or inefficient.

In a report, prepared for a UK parliamentary committee, it concluded that too much aid was absorbed by “profits for companies” or “subcontractors” or spent on high salaries and living expenses for “expatriate staff.”

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, has also felt the need to make public her alarm at the number of civilian casualties caused by international forces in Afghanistan.

Speaking to the BBC in Kabul, at the end of a six-day visit to the country this month, Arbour said the casualties were eroding public trust.

She criticised insurgents for using suicide bombings and human shields, but said public opinion was clear—there was a higher expectation of international forces to do everything possible to avoid killing or injuring civilians.

“In public opinion...there’s an expectation, in a sense higher expectations on behalf of international forces. That being said, the legal standard is exactly the same.”

The commissioner later raised concerns about whether ISAF was turning detainees over to torture in Afghan custody.

“I think it’s really critical that this issue be looked at, and ISAF collectively, the NATO command, should also take ownership of that issue.

“So far it’s been left to the various troop-contributing governments to deal with the issue as they saw fit,” she added.

“Their international obligations...mean that anybody they take into detention, they have a responsibility not to turn over if there is a risk of torture, and I think the documentation now shows there is a considerable risk.”

NATO head Jaap de Hoop Scheffer sought to respond to the accumulating criticism—after a meeting with Karzai—by repeating the previous mantra: that NATO forces had changed their procedure to reduce the threat to civilians.

According to BBC News Kabul correspondent David Loyn, “The meeting comes amid growing concern in several member countries about the continued commitment to Afghanistan.

“Scheffer referred directly to the increasing questions being asked about the Afghan deployment in some NATO member countries, saying there was a need to win hearts and minds back home.”

Finally, Scheffer simply appealed for “understanding” on the issue and said there was no “moral equivalent” between the civilians killed by the Taliban and those killed by NATO.

It is clear that both NATO and Karzai fear a backlash from recent events. There have been a number of demonstrations in recent weeks.

Whatever the final findings into the incident, it throws into sharp relief the total disregard the Western-backed government and its functionaries have for the lives of ordinary Afghans.

The incident occurred in the normally “peaceful” north, raising the spectre of the spread of instability and the insurgency to that area.

The Taliban denied responsibility for the blast, but former mujahedin were involved—which also raises another issue that is just as explosive. So far, occupation forces have relied heavily on bringing former mujahedin and assorted warlords into the so-called democratic process (bribery with money, power and land by US authorities, to be precise) in order to hold an uneasy peace while they seek to pick off the Taliban militia. If this arrangement is showing signs of unravelling, then Afghanistan could witness a huge escalation of occupation-inspired violence.



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