

US continues its killing of Afghan civilians

Bombs wipe out wedding party, 47 dead

David Walsh
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American air strikes alone have killed dozens of Afghan civilians, perhaps close to one hundred, in less than two weeks, as the fighting in the country intensifies and the US and its allies step up their efforts to suppress the anti-occupation insurgency.

The American military admitted killing eight civilians in the southwestern province of Farah, near the Iranian border, on July 15. The deputy provincial governor Mohammad Younus Rasouli told the AFP news service that nine women, two men and a boy had been killed.

According to a statement from the US-led coalition, a convoy came under attack in the Bakwa district (whose approximately 80,000 residents are Pashtuns). "The coalition convoy returned fire and called for close air support on the enemy positions. A house was hit; eight civilians were killed, two others injured," the statement said. It is impossible to say whether this report bears any resemblance to the truth.

As is the norm in such cases, the military statement asserted, "Coalition forces never intentionally target non-combatants, and deeply regret any occurrence such as this where civilians are killed and injured as a result of insurgent activity and actions." In fact, the targeting of civilians is an inevitable and necessary part of counter-insurgency operations, aimed at terrorizing the population into submission.

On Thursday, US forces claimed they killed 15 "insurgents" in northwestern Afghanistan, in Herat province, in another air strike. NATO's International Security Assistance Force, in a statement, asserted that there was no evidence of civilian casualties or accidental damage in the operation.

However, according to the BBC, "The first reports of the operation in Herat province came from tribal elders who claimed huge numbers of people had been killed or injured in a US-led attack from midnight until mid-morning in Shindand district.

"They said a high-profile tribal leader had died and houses had been destroyed.

"There were also unconfirmed reports of demonstrations in the Zerkoh valley, a fiercely independent tribal area where US forces have clashed with local fighters before."

The "tribal leader" in question was said to be Haji Nasrullah Khan, who attended a ceremony last year alongside Afghan

President Hamid Karzai at which condolences were passed along following an earlier US attack in which local residents were killed. The BBC notes that Khan's death "could see President Karzai coming under pressure from tribal allies to whom he was linked."

The worst massacre in recent weeks occurred July 6, when an American air strike wiped out an Afghan wedding party in the Deh Bala district—located in the eastern province of Nangarhar near the Pakistan border—and killed 47 people, including 39 women and children. Another nine were wounded.

The bride was among the dead.

A nine-member inquiry team appointed by the Karzai regime investigated the attack after reports of civilian casualties were arrogantly denied by the US military.

The team's spokesman Burhanullah Shinwari, deputy speaker of Afghanistan's senate and a leading official in the Karzai puppet government, told the media, "We found that 47 civilians, mostly women and children, were killed in the air strikes and another nine were wounded ... They were all civilians and had no links with the Taliban or al-Qaida."

According to the *Guardian*, "Around 10 people were missing and believed to be still under rubble, he [Shinwari] said. The inquiry team were shown the bloodied clothes of women and children in a visit to the scene."

The bride was on her way to meet her future husband as local tradition demands, along with a large party of villagers. Lal Wazir, who helped convey the wounded to a provincial hospital in Jalalabad, told the Associated Press (AP), "They stopped in a narrow location for rest. The [US] plane came and bombed the area.

"There were between 80 to 90 people altogether. We have carried six of the injured to this hospital, and more might be coming. The exact number of casualties is not clear."

The government inquiry, writes the AP, found that the wedding party "was targeted twice Sunday, as they walked along with the bride from her village toward the groom's house in another village." Shinwari said his group, which included representatives from the ministry of defense, the intelligence service and parliament, gathered information from eyewitnesses and victims' relatives.

The members of the commission handed out \$2,000 for every

person killed and \$1,000 for those wounded. The dead were all buried in the same cemetery near the village where the attack occurred.

In a remarkable understatement, Shinwari commented, "If such events continue, the population will distance itself from the government."

The US military initially dismissed claims that the air strike resulted in civilian deaths. Their brutal comments express the outlook of colonial occupiers, indifferent to the fate of the "natives."

A statement released by the US military declared: "Intelligence revealed a large group of militants operating in Deh Bala district. Coalition forces identified the militants in a mountainous region and used precision air strikes to kill them."

Coalition media officer Capt. Christian Patterson baldly told AFP, "It was not a wedding party, there were no women or children present."

First Lieutenant Nathan Perry, a US spokesman, told one media outlet, "We have had no reports of any non-combatants killed or injured in this incident ... This may just be normal, typical militant propaganda."

Perry told another that the American military had repeatedly seen militants falsely claim civilians had been killed. "Whenever we do an airstrike, the first thing they're going to cry is 'Airstrike killed civilians,' when the missile actually struck militant extremists we were targeting in the first place," he said. "At this time, we don't believe we've harmed anyone except for the combatants."

When the facts about the slaughter of the wedding party emerged, Perry felt obliged to change his tune slightly. "This incident regarding the airstrike on July 6th is still under investigation by coalition forces," he said July 11. "I assure you that civilians are never targeted, and that our forces go to great lengths to avoid civilian casualties."

Two days earlier, on July 4, US air strikes killed 17 civilians in Nuristan in northeastern Afghanistan, according to another government inquiry headed by defense ministry official Gen. Mohammad Amin. Numerous other local residents were wounded. The district governor reported that 22 civilians had died in the strike. The victims were apparently attempting to flee the area after being warned that a military operation was about to take place.

A US-NATO coalition statement claimed that "militants had fired" on a US base, then "the insurgents ... entered two vehicles and began traveling away from the firing position. Ground forces called coalition attack helicopters for support ... which then destroyed the two vehicles killing more than a dozen militants."

In fact, the dead reportedly included two doctors, a nurse, three shopkeepers, three drivers, a landowner, his wife, son, and his 8-month-old grandchild.

John Holmes, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, told

the media at least 250 US-led forces had killed civilians in 2008. Aid agencies and Afghan officials claim US-NATO forces are responsible for the deaths of 800 civilians since the beginning of 2007. The real figures are likely to be far higher.

The mounting death toll is a political problem for the Karzai regime, which now controls less territory than the insurgents and is widely despised.

The AFP cited the comment of a 28-year-old Kabul resident, following the July 7 suicide bombing outside the Indian embassy, which leveled his photocopy shop. "I don't know what to do now." But he would not vote for Karzai at the next election. "I would rather vote for a dog."

The upper house of Afghanistan's parliament, which owes its existence to the US forces, condemned civilian deaths in a statement last week. It declared, "They [US-NATO] should not act like the former Soviet Union did in Afghanistan," referring to the air raids. "NATO and coalition troops should take serious steps to not cause further harassment and persecution of the people and create a gap between the government and the people." Reuters reports that the upper house warned that if foreign troops continue to cause civilian casualties, "people will rise against them."

Weesa, a pro-Karzai government newspaper, published in Pashto, editorialized July 6 that the bombing raid in Nuristan could not be "considered anything other than a crime. It is deplorable that foreign troops based in Afghanistan have committed such a crime. Unfortunately, such arbitrary bombing raids, brutal killings and unprecedented wildness have been repeated so many times during the past nearly seven years that now it is difficult to believe that these foreign forces have come to our country for assistance and restoration of security....

"Why does the international community ... bomb our innocent and defenceless people in rural areas? If it is the war on terror, we condemn such a war. Do the international forces think that they will ensure security and protect their cities by carrying out such acts? ... They should realize that they will not only lose their friends, but dozens of people will join the ranks of the enemy every time they carry out such a merciless bombing raid."

This is the "Good War," fully supported by Republicans and Democrats alike.



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