

New York Times boosts Pentagon push for wider bombing in Afghanistan

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24 July 2008

A lengthy front-page article in Wednesday's *New York Times* cites US military officials to make the case for wider latitude in conducting bombing raids against targets in Afghanistan. The article by reporter Thom Shanker carries a headline reflecting the complaints of the Pentagon: "Civilian Risks Curbing Strikes in Afghan War."

According to this sympathetic account, "American and allied commanders said that even as orders for air attacks in Afghanistan had increased significantly this year, their ability to strike top insurgent leaders from the air was severely restricted by rules intended to minimize civilian casualties."

Shanker was given unprecedented access to the secret US base that controls the air war in Afghanistan and the adjacent tribal areas of Pakistan. He describes it only as "the air operations headquarters in Southwest Asia," adding that he was permitted to conduct interviews at the Combined Air and Space Operations Center "under a written agreement that neither the name of the base nor its location be published, in deference to the host nation's concerns."

It is widely known that US Air Force operations in the region are headquartered at a base in the Persian Gulf nation of Qatar, whose rulers wish to avoid publicity about their role in helping the US military carry out mass murder against the people of Iraq and Afghanistan and prepare further atrocities against Iran.

The *International Herald Tribune*, the European newspaper owned by the *Times*, published the same article with a different headline, one which more clearly reveals that Shanker was acting as a Pentagon mouthpiece: "Rules Protecting Civilians Hamper Airstrikes in Afghanistan, Military Says."

In its content and tone, the article resembles nothing so much as the official disinformation published by the *Times* in the run-up to the US invasion of Iraq, particularly the notorious articles by Judith Miller, the former *Times* journalist and conduit for top Bush administration officials like Lewis Libby, former chief of staff to Vice President Cheney and convicted perjurer.

These articles validated the case for war being made by the Bush administration by parroting its claims—since revealed as false and wholly fabricated—that Iraq had an active program to produce biological, chemical and nuclear weapons, as well as close ties to terrorist groups like Al Qaeda.

In the latest piece of propaganda, Shanker describes an

American military machine obsessed to the point of dysfunction with avoiding civilian casualties. The officers he interviews are "frustrated" by "obstacles" that have led to "missed opportunities" in targeting Taliban leaders. They claim that the Afghan insurgents "have learned to exploit the restrictions" on bombing.

These "restrictions," however, did not prevent the US and NATO air forces from killing hundreds of civilians during the first six months of 2008, according to figures reported by the United Nations. Shanker notes that more than twice as many bombs have been dropped on Afghanistan so far this year as in Iraq. In June alone, US and NATO forces used 646 bombs and missiles, an amount nearly equal to the total for Iraq so far this year.

Shanker cites complaints by Pentagon officials that the rules of engagement for Afghanistan are more stringent than in Iraq and require "a significantly lower risk of civilian casualties than was acceptable in Iraq." Approval by the regional commander, General David McKiernan, or even by Defense Secretary Robert Gates, is required for some particularly risky bombing raids.

The article describes supposedly elaborate efforts to avoid the slightest "collateral damage" either to life or property. Shanker writes approvingly, "At the air operations center, targeting specialists spend hours before each mission measuring distances from the potential strike zone to the nearest house, building, mosque, school or hospital."

Vast numbers of public, religious and historic sites make up a computer database of no-strike zones. Special goggles are worn while reviewing digital images compiled from surveillance aircraft and satellites to give a detailed, three-dimensional view of the target area."

In a passage that deserves to be noted as a monument to official lying, Shanker quotes the top military lawyer at the base, Col. Gary Brown, declaring, "We explicitly guarantee extra benefits to civilians." Brown claims to check the conformity of each bombing raid with the Geneva Conventions, and various judicial and legislative standards.

Brown is also the source for the claim that reports of massive civilian casualties are regularly fabricated by Taliban and Al Qaeda in order to discredit the US intervention in Afghanistan.

The reality is that US bombs have slaughtered dozens of innocent Afghan citizens on a regular basis. Some of the most recent incidents include:

* The death of somewhere between 17 and 22 people—reports differ—on July 4 in Nuristan province, on the eastern border. The victims were trying to flee from the scene of an announced US military operation. While the US-NATO forces claimed they had targeted “militants,” the dead reportedly included two doctors, a nurse, three shopkeepers, three drivers, a landowner, his wife, son, and his 8-month-old grandchild.

* The massacre of 47 people July 6, when US bombs struck a wedding party in Nangarhar province. In keeping with Afghan traditions, the bride and groom approached the wedding site from different directions, attended by male and female friends and relations respectively. The air strike hit the bride’s column, all women and children, and she was among the victims.

* The killing of as many as 12 people July 15 in Farah province, in the southwest. The dead included nine women, two men and a boy. The US military command issued its usual disavowal: “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.”

To its disgrace, the organization Human Rights Watch contributed to this charade, with its senior military analyst, Marc Garlasco, telling the *Times* reporter, “In their deliberate targeting, the Air Force has all but eliminated civilian casualties in Afghanistan. They have very effective collateral damage mitigation procedures.”

Civilian casualties are limited to cases of unplanned or quick-response targeting when US and NATO troops come under attack and call in air strikes, Garlasco added, as they did July 14 when Taliban forces nearly overran a US outpost near of the village of Wanat on the Afghanistan border with Pakistan.

Garlasco’s professional background is significant, though not reported by Shanker. He was a senior analyst at the Pentagon for seven years and served in 2003 as the chief of high value targeting during the US attack on Iraq. In other words, he coordinated efforts to use cruise missiles and other smart weapons to assassinate Saddam Hussein and other Iraqi leaders, before leaving the military and enlisting with the human rights watchdog group financed by billionaire George Soros.

The political purpose of the *Times* article is as obvious as it is despicable. By portraying the American air war against the Afghan people as an exercise in humanitarianism, the leading liberal newspaper in the United States seeks to condition public opinion to accept the escalation of the US war in Afghanistan most fervently advocated by the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, Senator Barack Obama.

The article follows a drumbeat of demands for more troops, weapons and warplanes in the Afghan theater that accompanied Obama’s much-publicized visit to Kabul. Obama, his Republican rival John McCain, and the Bush administration all

agree on dispatching at least two or three more brigades, about 10,000 soldiers, to build up the US-NATO occupation force that already numbers some 60,000.

In a statement Tuesday, a leading congressional Democratic spokesman on military affairs, House Armed Service Committee Chairman Ike Skelton of Missouri, called for more troops. “I can’t put a number on it,” he said, “but there are going to be more. We’re short of NATO troops. We’re short of American troops. We’re short 3,000 trainers of the Afghan army. If we’re going to come out of there successful, we’ve got to have more troops.”

Besides the troops, the Associated Press reports that the Pentagon wants to send an additional 800 bomb-resistant military vehicles to Afghanistan, to counteract a rise in Iraq-style roadside bomb attacks.

The US-NATO occupation and its stooge, Afghan President Hamid Karzai, are facing increasing guerrilla resistance throughout the country, not limited to forces loyal to the ousted Taliban regime. Insurgent attacks were up 40 percent in June 2008 compared to the same month last year.

According to press reports, the Afghan guerrillas who nearly overran the US base at Wanat in Nuristan last week included fighters from several different organizations. The US abandoned the base July 16, two days after its garrison of 45 US and 25 Afghan soldiers was nearly wiped out. The US forces suffered nine dead and 15 wounded, a casualty rate of more than 50 percent.

The Afghan interior ministry confirmed July 21 that Taliban forces had overrun the Ajiristan district in central Ghazni province, 125 miles southwest of Kabul, after Afghan security forces abandoned the district center under attack. The district was captured by the Taliban last October but later retaken by pro-government forces.

Meanwhile, the Democratic-controlled US Congress has approved legislation that would authorize construction of ammunition storage and power generation facilities at the Bagram Air Base outside Kabul, a sign that the Pentagon is planning a long-term presence there. Bagram was described by the Pentagon’s Central Command (CENTCOM) as “the centerpiece for the CENTCOM Master Plan for future access to and operations in Central Asia.”



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