Afghanistan: US, NATO, Karzai regime investigate Azizabad massacre

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The United States, NATO, and the Karzai regime in Kabul have announced a joint investigation into the most recent coalition air strike massacre of Afghan civilians.

With mounting civilian casualties threatening to produce a nationwide backlash against the occupation of the country, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates, during an unannounced visit to Bagram air base September 19, restated the order by General David McKiernan, NATO commander in Afghanistan, to convene a joint investigation.

The US military and Afghan authorities are to officially investigate United Nations-backed reports by villagers in Azizabad, western Afghanistan, that an August 22 coalition air strike killed at least 90 people, 60 of whom were children and 15 women.

The attack was carried out by a US AC-130 ground attack aircraft, equipped with a rapid-fire five-barrel 25mm Gatling gun, a 40mm Bofors cannon and a 105mm howitzer. The gunship is designed to lay waste to exposed targets with an indiscriminate torrent of bullets and artillery shells.

Accounts from survivors of the attack describe repeated strikes on houses where dozens of children were sleeping, and parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts huddled inside with them. Most of the village families were asleep when the shooting broke out, some sleeping out under mosquito nets in the yards of their houses while others slept inside the small rooms of their houses, lying close together on the floor, with up to 20 people in a room.

The US military has not only sought to conceal its guilt in this latest war crime perpetrated on the Afghan people, but has used every opportunity to discredit accounts of eyewitnesses and survivors.

Initially, US military spokesmen brazenly declared that the air strike had been “a legitimate strike against the Taliban” and denied that any civilian casualties had occurred.

Only later, as media reports began to circulate and an investigation by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) seemed to confirm the worst claims made by relatives of the deceased and others did the US military concede that some civilians had been killed. Even then, authorities accused surviving villagers of exaggerating the numbers killed and of harbouring Taliban fighters on the day of the attack.

On August 26, the Russian government circulated a draft United Nations Security Council statement that expressed concerns over the civilian casualties in the Azizabad air strike. It stated that member nations “strongly deplore the fact that this is not the first incident of this kind.”

On September 8, a video recorded on a mobile phone emerged, showing around 40 dead bodies. The video, recorded by a doctor shortly after the coalition attack, revealed the appalling aftermath of the air strike—dead bodies laid out in the village mosque amidst the rubble of destroyed houses.

Even in the face of such mounting evidence, the US military continues to dispute the death toll, currently saying it killed only “five to seven” civilians along with “30 to 35 rebels.”

Members of the Afghan government investigation commission said that US authorities were simply attempting to cover up the truth. “The Americans are guilty in this incident: it is much better for them to confess the reality rather than hiding the truth,” said Abdul Salam Qazizada, a member of Parliament and the government commission from Herat Province, where the strike occurred.

It is against this background that the US military has announced its “joint investigation” with the Afghan authorities.

The official rationale given by US/NATO for the air strike is that its forces were undertaking an operation in pursuit of a Taliban commander named Mullah Siddiq. A man claiming to be Siddiq later phoned the station *Radio Liberty* insisting that he had been nowhere near Azizabad. Reporters at the radio station, who asked not to be identified, said they knew Siddiq’s voice well.

Villagers have consistently maintained that a large crowd had assembled in Azizabad, from the village and the outlying areas at the time of the US assault, to commemorate the recent death of a local leader.

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Arguing against US allegations of Taliban influence in the village, many residents work for the Afghan police force and US-sponsored construction companies.

One of several men in the village working for a private security firm, Yakhakhan, 51, said he heard shooting and was just coming out of his house when he saw his neighbour's sons running across. "They were killed right here; they were 10 and 7 years old," he said.

In the compound next to his, he said, four whole families, including those of his two brothers, were killed. "They bombard us, they hate us, they kill us," he said. "God will punish them."

All the villagers interviewed strongly refuted US claims of Taliban activity in the village. Relatives of those killed in the raid insisted that none of them were supporters of the Taliban. Eight of the men killed were security guards working for a private US security company. Two other security guards and three members of the local Afghan police were detained by US forces during the raid. Four of them were released a week later.

A police officer, Muhammad Alam, 35, who was accused by the US of being a Taliban supporter and was detained for a week after the air strikes before being released, said: "You can see our ID cards. If the Taliban caught me, they would slaughter me."

The prominent Khan family were hosting a memorial ceremony for a relative who was killed in a dispute a year ago. Two of the Khans had cards issued by an US Special Forces officer that designated them as a "coordinator for the USSF."

A report by the New York-based group Human Rights Watch earlier this month stated that civilian deaths in Afghanistan from US and NATO air strikes nearly tripled in the past year and recent bombings have led to more killings, fuelling a "public backlash."

Despite earlier changes in the "rules of engagement" that had slightly reduced the rate of civilian casualties since they peaked in July last year, continuing air strikes had greatly undermined local support for international forces in the country.

Anger amongst the Afghan population threatens to destabilise the US client regime of President Hamid Karzai. There is mounting concern in western capitals over the weakening position of Karzai, who has never been able to project his authority much beyond the capital, Kabul, and has been heavily criticised for failing to deal with ministers accused of corruption and incompetence.

Karzai faces elections next August, and is being pressured by London and Washington to take his campaign into the countryside. This is at a time when there is open alarm over the worsening security situation, particularly along the principal roads across the country. Route 1 from Kabul to Kandahar has become far more dangerous over the past few months, particularly for Afghan government employees.

Amidst belligerent comments directed towards Pakistan and calls for a doubling of the US-backed Afghan army, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates also made great play of calling for swift compensation for the relatives of US/NATO inflicted civilian casualties.

Pentagon officials have repeatedly complained that delays in apologizing for civilian deaths and providing compensation (usually between $100—$200 per victim) were severely harming the US-led military occupation regime in Afghanistan.

"Too often in our pursuit of the truth, we lose valuable time and end up on the losing end of our battle with insurgents for the hearts and minds of the Afghan people," declared Pentagon Press Secretary Geoff Morrell.

Speaking at Bagram air base, Gates said the US would pay compensation for casualties before a full investigation. But as a staff writer of the *Los Angeles Times*, September 18, explained, "It remained unclear how generous the United States would be in practice. In the most controversial recent air strike, in the village of Azizabad, US officials initially said about seven civilians were killed; Afghan and United Nations investigators maintain that about 90 civilians died.

"Had the new policy been in effect when that air strike occurred, US officials suggested, they would have initially provided compensation only for the families of the seven they believed were mistakenly killed. If the Pentagon sticks to that more conservative approach, the move to speed compensation payments may do little to offset public anger."

The foreign policy consensus in the US is that if reliance on military airpower is not to jeopardize the occupation of Afghanistan, then a much greater deployment of troops has to take place. In reality a "troop surge" will not prevent the proliferation of civilian deaths, but will lead to an escalation in the death toll of both Afghans and occupation forces.

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