

More civilian casualties in Afghanistan

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The first week of 2009 saw at least three incidents in which occupation forces stand accused of killing or injuring Afghan civilians during operations against the Taliban-led insurgency.

Officials representing the provincial government of Helmand alleged that on January 5, British troops killed five members of the same family in the Baghni district. For weeks, the British force in Helmand has been waging an offensive in areas that have long been outside occupation control. Seventeen British troops have been killed and scores wounded in fierce fighting, according the *Independent*. No figures have been released on civilian and insurgent casualties.

US troops are accused of slaughtering, on January 6, at least 17 civilians, including women and children, during an assault on the home of an alleged Taliban commander in the village of Masamoot in the eastern province of Laghman. The office of Afghan president Hamid Karzai publicly vouched for the reports.

Abu Yusef Haideri, a local man interviewed by the British *Telegraph*, claimed that the attack took place in the early hours of the morning. US forces not only killed the commander, but his young son and two brothers, and then blew up his house. Neighbours who came out of their houses were fired on indiscriminately. "Even if people just asked 'what is happening?' from the windows, they shot them," Haideri said. He claimed the death toll was 22, with another seven wounded.

A US military spokesman, Colonel Jerry O'Hara, told the press that the death toll was 32, but "all killed were militants". Contradicting himself however, he stated: "If any civilians were involved in this operation, our sincere condolences to them and their family."

On January 9, the Australian media reported that an investigation had been initiated into claims that Australian troops injured nine Afghan civilians in the Baluchi Valley area of Uruzgan province. According to

the reports, local Afghan sources said several people had been killed. While the exact date and details have not been revealed, the incident appears to have followed the January 3 killing of an Australian soldier by a Taliban rocket strike.

The United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) blamed the occupation forces for 695 civilian deaths in the first 10 months of 2008—a sharp increase from the estimated 556 killed during the same time period in 2007. It also blamed insurgent actions, particularly a number of large suicide bombings, for some 1,100 fatalities.

The three incidents in the first week of 2009, which caused some 22 deaths and a number of injuries, make clear the carnage is ongoing, despite the constant claims by US and NATO officials that every effort is made to avoid civilian fatalities. The toll can be expected to rise as 30,000 additional American troops deploy to Afghanistan and counter-insurgency operations are stepped-up. The so-called "surge" in Iraq in 2007 was accompanied by the highest rate of civilian casualties of the entire war.

Estimates of civilian deaths based on media reports since the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 range from 4,800 to 7,000 killed by US and NATO forces, with another 3,000 deaths caused by insurgent actions. As in Iraq, figures derived from media estimates must be considered an under-estimation due to the lack of reportage of many incidents and the unknown numbers of wounded who died later of their injuries.

The figure does not include the tens of thousands of alleged "Taliban" deaths. In the past three years, media accounts based on US and NATO body counts add up to well over 10,000 fatalities among the insurgents. On a number of occasions, it has been subsequently established that the victims were innocent Afghan civilians.

The killing and maiming of civilians is a significant factor fuelling the hatred of the foreign forces and support for the insurgency. Combined with the appalling poverty facing the population and the Karzai government's endemic corruption, the continuing deaths underscore the neo-colonial character of the US-led occupation and its indifference to the plight of the Afghan people.

Yesterday, the US/NATO forces in Afghanistan announced that they were "tightening" their rules of engagement in order to lessen "collateral damage"—civilian deaths. Afghan government troops will now reportedly lead most house-to-house searches and raids into religious sites.

For the population, such a change means little. Government troops are just as likely as US and NATO personnel to gun down anyone regarded as a threat or an obstacle to their operations. Moreover, most civilian casualties are inflicted by air strikes, in which villages and hamlets have been pounded with high-explosive munitions. Last year, the occupation forces in Afghanistan flew an average of 1,500 air sorties a month, with an average of 250 ending with the dropping of bombs.



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