

As Vice President Biden warns of an “uptick” in casualties

Afghanistan civilians killed in US military raid

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A US military raid in the eastern Afghanistan province of Laghman last Friday night resulted in the deaths of at least 16 civilians, including women and children, according to local residents. Several Afghan officials, as well as President Hamid Karzai, backed reports of a massacre. US military officials denied the allegations, insisting that their forces killed 15 people, all of whom were Taliban insurgents who had attacked the occupying forces.

Thousands of Afghans demonstrated yesterday in Mehtar Lam, the capital of Laghman province, despite heavy rain. People chanted slogans against the US and President Karzai. Protestors threw stones at the provincial governor who had reportedly tried to calm the crowd. "I'm ready to start jihad against the Americans," one man told a Kabul television network.

Details of exactly what happened during the US military operation remain scant, with various sources providing different estimates of the casualties. Elders in Guloch, a village 60 kilometres north-east of Kabul where the US raid took place, told the Associated Press they were ready to swear on the Koran that all those killed by US forces were civilians. They insisted that the local residents were shepherds and had no ties to militant forces.

One elder, Malik Rahman Gul, told Reuters that 22 civilians were killed. "Their bodies are on the ground," he said. "If you [the Afghan government] do not believe us, you have helicopters and you should come to the area and see that these are civilians."

Provincial council head, Emadudin Abdulrahimzay, told Agence France Presse that 21 people were killed and their bodies were found at different locations. "They were all civilians, including two women and two children," he said.

Abdul Khaliq Hussaini, a parliamentarian who represents Laghman province, said he believed 16 people, 11 of them civilians, had been killed.

The provincial governor of eastern Laghman, Lutfullah Mashal, said he understood that US forces were responsible for the deaths of 10 civilians. "We have sent a team to the area to investigate, but the preliminary reports show that 10 civilians were killed as well as three who might be Taliban," he told Reuters. Mashal complained that the operation had not been coordinated with any local government, police, or military officials.

As is now routine, the US military issued a blanket denial of reports of civilian casualties. Eleven "militants" were killed by small arms fire, it said in a statement, while four others were killed by "precision air weapons". Military officials admitted that one of those killed was a woman, but insisted that she was shot after being seen carrying a rocket-propelled grenade. US troops detained one person.

Foreign forces have killed at least 700 civilians in Afghanistan in the past 12 months, fuelling popular opposition to the US-NATO occupation.

The day before the Laghman province raid, a NATO soldier killed a man who was allegedly burying an explosive device near a military base in Gereshk district, 530 kilometres south-west of Kabul. NATO spokesmen later admitted that an investigation revealed the man was a civilian and had not been carrying any explosives. Another man was killed, and four others wounded, by NATO forces after they came under fire while on patrol in nearby Sagin district last Wednesday. NATO later expressed its "regret" for the civilian casualties.

Washington's puppet Karzai, facing re-election for president later this year, has had to distance himself from the increasingly bloody US-NATO military operations. He released a statement that condemned the killings in Laghman province and refuted US denials of civilian casualties. He said 16 civilians, including two women and three children, were killed.

The US raid was one of a series of violent incidents in recent days that underscore the increasingly fraught position of the occupying forces.

Resistance fighters fired rockets at a NATO base in north-eastern Kunar province on Friday but reportedly missed and hit a house, killing a girl and wounding two others. In the southern Kandahar province, Taliban militants attacked a police post on Friday night, killing three policemen according to a local officer. The Taliban claimed they killed 15 police. Also on Friday, a roadside bomb hit a NATO and Afghan military convoy in western Farah province, killing an Afghan soldier and wounding five NATO troops.

On Saturday another roadside bomb killed a NATO soldier in southern Afghanistan. The same day, a suicide bomber attacked a market in the eastern Paktia province, reportedly killing two civilians and wounding eight. A Taliban spokesman claimed that an intelligence official and his agents were the targets.

The deteriorating situation confronting US and NATO forces has generated debate within Washington foreign policy circles over whether the Obama administration's plan to nearly double the number of US ground forces in Afghanistan, deploying an additional 30,000 soldiers, will prove sufficient.

An article in the *New York Times* yesterday, "Obama's War: Fearing Another Quagmire in Afghanistan", asked: "Can President Obama succeed in that long-lamented 'graveyard of empires'—a place that has crushed foreign occupiers for more than 2,000 years? ... Afghanistan has, after all, stymied would-be conquerors since Alexander the Great. It's always the same story; the invaders—British, Soviets—control the cities, but not the countryside. And eventually, the invaders don't even control the cities, and are sent packing. Think Iraq was hard? Afghanistan, former Secretary of State Colin Powell argues, will be 'much, much harder'."

After citing various options advanced by different foreign policy and military analysts—including placing additional

pressure on Karzai and reducing government corruption—the article indicated that additional troops would be required. Karin von Hippel of the Center for Strategic and International Studies complained that there were only 200,000 foreign forces in Afghanistan, compared to 600,000 in Iraq. "Those numbers [in Afghanistan] are so low that an extra 30,000 isn't going to get you to where you need to be," she declared. "It's more of a stop-gap measure."

The *New York Times* article forms part of a wider campaign to condition public opinion for a massive escalation in violence in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

The Laghman province killings—which come after the deaths of 18 people in a US air raid on Pakistan last Friday—point to the measures that will be used to suppress all opposition from ordinary people in the region.

US Vice President Joe Biden yesterday appeared on CBS's "Meet the Press" and warned that the war in Afghanistan would soon intensify. Asked if things were going to get "tougher" there before they got better, Biden replied, "That's true". Then asked if more American casualties should be expected, he responded: "I hate to say it, but yes, I think, there will be. There will be an uptick, because as the commander in Afghanistan said [to me], 'Joe, we will get this done but we're going to be engaging the enemy that much more'."

Biden's remarks again demonstrate the chasm between the new administration's intentions and the sentiments of the millions of ordinary people who voted for the Democrats in the hope that ousting the Republicans would put an end to Bush's agenda of war and militarism. Having promised "change", President Obama is now pursuing the same central strategic goal of US imperialism which underpinned the former Bush administration's so-called war on terror—the control of the vast energy resources in the Middle East and Central Asia and the shutting out of rival powers from the region.



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