

US airstrike kills six civilians in Afghanistan

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US attack helicopters killed six civilians Monday in Afghanistan's mountainous eastern Kunar province near the Pakistan border. The attack follows by less than a week a raid by US troops in nearby Khost province that killed five innocent civilians, four of them relatives of an Afghan army officer.

While US military officials claimed that all those killed in Monday's attack were "enemy fighters" and that the target had been picked based on "multiple intelligence sources," Afghan officials on the ground told a very different story.

The governor of the Watapor district in Kunar Province, Zalmay Yousfzai, reported that the helicopters demolished one house and inflicted heavy damage on several others. In addition to the six civilians killed in the raid, another 14 were wounded, four of them seriously, he said.

The district police chief also affirmed that all of those killed and wounded were civilians. Among the dead were a three-year-old girl and a 10-year-old boy. The wounded included a one-year-old.

The Agence France-Presse news agency interviewed two of the wounded at the local hospital, including a 14-year-old boy who said that four members of his family had died in the US air strike.

"We were asleep, and all of a sudden the roof collapsed," the boy, who identified himself as Zakirullah, told AFP. "I don't remember anything. I got to know here that my father, my mother, my brother and my younger sister have all been killed, and I am wounded."

A woman, named Shahida, told the news agency: "We were asleep and heard a strange noise and then the roof and walls collapsed. The people took me out of the rubble and there are many still there. I was told nine people from my family were killed and wounded. I don't know who is dead, who is wounded and who is alive in my family."

A spokesman for the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force said that it would investigate the reported civilian casualties. The spokesman, Capt. Mark

Durkin, added that if there were deaths, the occupation forces would "provide assistance to support the law-abiding people affected."

Such blood money does little to assuage the popular outrage provoked by the killing of innocent men, women and children by foreign occupiers. Even President Hamid Karzai, whose corrupt and feeble regime remains in power solely thanks to the US troop presence, has felt compelled to repeatedly condemn such attacks and demand that the occupation force stop killing civilians.

The initial claims that only insurgents were killed, followed by the promise of an investigation is the standard response of the US military. Just four days earlier, after making virtually identical statements, a spokesman for the US-led occupation was forced to acknowledge that those killed in the April 8 attack on the home of the Afghan officer, Col. Awal Khan, had not been "enemy fighters."

Among the dead were Khan's wife, who was a local school teacher, two children, and his brother. The wife of the Khan's cousin, who lived next door, came out of her house during the raid. The US troops shot the woman, who was nine months pregnant, five times in the abdomen.

"She survived but her child died. The child was hit by bullets," Khost province health director Abdul Majeed told AFP.

In a report released in February, the United Nations said that the civilian death toll in Afghanistan had risen to over 2,100 in 2008, a 40 percent increase over the previous year. It said that US and NATO troops were responsible for at least 828 of these deaths, the majority of them inflicted by air strikes.

According to data compiled by the Afghan Victims Memorial Project, between 156 and 160 civilians have been killed by the US-led occupation forces since President Barack Obama took office on January 21. Of these victims, 56 were children, 15 women, between 41 and 43 men and another 38 to 40 whose age and gender were unknown.

A similar steady escalation of the civilian death toll has been recorded across the border in Pakistan, which the Obama administration is now treating as part of a broader regional theater of war. According to figures compiled by Pakistani authorities, in the course of 60 missile attacks by pilotless Predator drones carried out since 2006, 701 people have been killed, 687 of them civilians. At least 152 people have died in these attacks in the first 99 days of 2009, according to the Pakistani authorities—only two of them linked to al Qaeda.

The most recent Predator attack was launched on April 8, just hours after Pakistani military and civilian leaders met with Obama's envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Michael Mullen and registered a formal protest over the missile strikes.

The killing of both Afghans and Pakistanis is only going to escalate as some 21,000 more US troops are deployed in Afghanistan in the coming weeks, the Pentagon's top uniformed officer warned Tuesday.

Admiral Mullen told ABC television that the US escalation would mean a surge of violence.

"I look forward to a very active year," said Mullen. "I want to be clear that my expectations are as we add more troops, the violence level in Afghanistan is going to go up."

The military chief said that 17,000 more US combat troops and 4,000 military trainers will soon be deployed in Afghanistan and would ultimately have "the right impact."

There are already 38,000 US troops in the country. Washington plans to boost that number to 68,000 by autumn, and the top US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David McKiernan, has asked for 10,000 more. Other NATO countries have approximately 32,000 troops in the country.

The US military escalation will serve to intensify resistance to the American occupation on both sides the border, while further destabilizing the government in Pakistan. After more than seven years of military violence, the US is facing a rapidly disintegrating security and political situation in Afghanistan, where the Taliban, driven out of government by the October 2001 invasion, now controls large swaths of the country.

Across the border in western Pakistan—including the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan, which, like southeastern Afghanistan, are inhabited largely by Pashtuns—the US presence has fueled a growing

insurgency that has only been strengthened by popular anger over the drone attacks and Pakistani army repression, which in addition to killing civilians, have driven some 550,000 people from their homes.

While Washington has demanded that Pakistan take even more repressive measures to deny the Taliban "safe havens" from which they can launch attacks in neighboring Afghanistan, President Asif Ali Zardari is anxious to damp down the conflict for fear that it will threaten his government's survival.

Thus, on Monday, to Washington's consternation, Zardari signed legislation that imposes Islamic law in the Swat Valley, which had been the scene of protracted and bloody fighting between government forces and local Islamist militants. The measure essentially amounts to a peace agreement with the local Taliban, whose ranks have reportedly doubled over the past year.

While the deal was supposed to secure the disarming of the Islamists, last week Taliban fighters advanced out of Swat and moved southeast into the Bruner district, defeating local police and militia in armed clashes and establishing their domination of the valley, which is barely 60 miles from the Pakistani capital.

The Obama administration is desperately attempting to salvage the war launched by President Bush in the name of fighting terrorism, but with the strategic objective of securing US hegemony in Central Asia, with its vast energy resources. Its escalation and extension into Pakistan, however, will have the effect of spreading instability and armed conflict with potentially catastrophic results.



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